

G. K. CHESTERTON

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G. K. CHESTERTON

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*To*  
*My Father and*  
*Mother*



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## PREFACE

The works of G. K. Chesterton combine great variety of expression with extreme consistency of thought, so that it is difficult to establish satisfactory divisions among his writings. For the sake of convenience, this essay is forced to set up artificial barriers between subjects which are naturally related, when it should in fact be cyclic, unfolding a single simultaneous purpose through all varieties of his composition. It cannot therefore be completely comprehensive, and some definition of its scope is necessary.

This essay is primarily concerned with Chesterton's philosophy and literary expression and contains no attempt at biography. The *Autobiography* and the recent book by Professor Cammaerts have adequately dealt with the details of his life, so that nothing but incidental reference is here made to them.

Neither has separate consideration been given to Chesterton's historical or literary criticism, for the reason that he approaches his subjects from a doctrinal point of view, generally choosing such figures as illustrate his beliefs. It has been found

convenient, therefore, to treat these works as a part of his general exposition of doctrine, rather than to give them a separate chapter.

Finally, I have made no study of Chesterton as an artist or illustrator, although he has had considerable success in this field. It is sufficient to mention that his heroes are usually notable for a certain Gladstonian cast of countenance.

With this brief introduction, we may begin.

M. E.

*February 1939*

## Chapter I

### *Background and Influences*

The works of Chesterton are essentially a product of their age. He began writing in 1901 with a vigorous attack on the spirit of the 'nineties, and he continued to attack it ever after. The closing years of the century seem to have left so permanent an impression on his mind that his latest works are still tinged with the colour of his revolt; and we feel that to the end he was refuting forgotten heresies, like the monk, Michael, in his novel, *The Ball and the Cross*. A study of his philosophy must therefore begin with a rough survey of the period and what he thought of it.

(His principal accusation is one of pessimism. In *The Defendant* (1901) Chesterton inveighs against a pessimism that had become almost fashionable. "I have found that every man is disposed to call the green leaf of the tree a little less green than it is.") And at the other end of his life, he looks back with horror on the period. "I had an overpowering impulse to record or draw horrible ideas and images; plunging deeper

and deeper into a blind spiritual suicide" (*Autobiography*). (It was to him a time of philosophical anarchy; and he felt the vital need for some form of optimism, even if it were based on the bare minimum of good.)

(The fundamental cause was pride, the belief that man has the right to criticize the universe, if it is not to his liking. "What we call a bad civilization", he writes in *The Defendant*, "is a good civilization not good enough for us." Man is born into the world by no agency of his own, and yet feels that he can criticize it "as if he were house hunting, as if he were being shown over a new suite of apartments" (*Orthodoxy*). This is the great spiritual sin; for it not only prevents us from making the best of inevitable and inescapable facts, but limits our existence by making us feel superior to many valuable planes of life. The *Confessions* of George Moore are saturated with this pride, a perpetual scorn of "the vulgar details of our vulgar age". And with that young man, exclusiveness leads to boredom.

Evolution is the main philosophical source of pride. It has become erroneously identified with progress and so can easily be used to establish the doctrine of human perfectability. But evolution leads, at the same time, to moral scepticism, which



is one of the chief diseases of the age. Ideals become useless because, as Chesterton points out in *Orthodoxy*, no ideal can be final, if we are perpetually evolving into something higher. The mad Darwinian in *The Ball and the Cross* says: "Never trust a god you can't improve on." Consequently morality must fail, because we have no permanent base on which to establish it. What may be immoral to-day may be moral to-morrow, and everything becomes relative. "All had grown dizzy with degree and relativity . . . so that there would be very little difference between eating dog and eating darkie, or between eating darkie and eating dago" (*What I saw in America*).

Now even the 'nineties did not go as far as cannibalism, but there can be observed a weakening of morality in the interests of evolution. The New Hedonism of Oscar Wilde preaches the sacrifice of accepted morality to the production of a higher type of individual. A man must cultivate a finer sensibility even if it leads him into crime in the search of new experiences. Similarly Nietzsche in Germany, under the evolutionary spell, teaches revolt against all repressive morality in the interests of the superman who is to be evolved. The superman of *Thus spake Zarathustra* exemplifies the survival of

the fittest. In man's ruthless struggle for existence the weaker is crushed and the cruel dominant virtues of will destroy the humbler ideals of Christianity. George Moore talks of "the terrible austere laws of nature which ordain that the weak shall be trampled upon, shall be ground into death and dust, that the strong shall be glorious and sublime". This denial of accepted morality appears in a milder form in Shaw's golden rule that there is no golden rule, another manifestation of moral scepticism.

But if evolution leads to a conception of the superman, it also produces fatalism. If man has only survived by a struggle, his whole history becomes something harsh and predestined, directed entirely by nature, "red in tooth and claw". The works of Hardy illustrate this fatalistic attitude. The characters of *The Dynasts* are puppets in the hands of a callous and impartial divinity; the Mayor of Casterbridge is fated from the beginning, and Tess of the D'Urbervilles is the sport of the Immortals. It is significant, too, that Hardy's novels are frequently tragedies of love in which the animal aspect is greatly emphasized. Marriage in *Jude the Obscure* is, indeed, defined as a licence to make love to someone on certain premises. (Through the idea of evolution, sex has

become identified with the animal in man, "the ape and the tiger", and a type of fatalism is postulated from the sway of our lower natures. This too produces moral scepticism, for you cannot blame a man for his actions if he cannot help himself. Evolution, therefore, is one source of the pessimism which Chesterton analyses.)

The rationalistic philosophies of the period also end in pessimism. Rationalism implies that the human reason is capable of understanding all things and discovering consistency everywhere. In consequence it forces everything into a narrow scheme and limits the rich diversity of the universe, leading logically, though not inevitably, to madness. There is a brilliant chapter on this point in *Orthodoxy*. Imagination accepts contradiction and so is sane; but reason seeks to explain: "to cross the infinite sea and so make it finite; and the result is physical exhaustion". The completely logical man is, in fact, the madman. He has an obsession and finds evidence for it in everything he sees. For example, if he has a persecution mania, he will find a conspiratorial significance in "the ordinary thoughtless actions of a sane man slashing the grass with a stick, kicking his heels"; they will become signals to accomplices, threats of violence or deliberate

snubbings, all logically fitted into the framework of the obsession. "The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason." To impose a logical consistency on varied facts in this way is a possible interpretation of those facts, but it is a poor and limited interpretation. It denies all the irrelevant variety of the evidence it incorporates; and so produces a limited experience and happiness.

In the same way rationalistic philosophies like materialism are an interpretation, but a very narrow interpretation, of the facts. It may be possible to argue that "history has been simply and solely a chain of material causation": but to do so is to deny all the rich diversity of history. "Materialism", he writes, "has a sort of insane simplicity . . . but if the cosmos of the materialist is a real cosmos, it is not much of a cosmos" (*Orthodoxy*). But materialism, if logically pursued, leads beyond a merely limited view of life, to total scepticism. We can never prove the existence of physical objects corresponding to our sense impressions, for example: we can only believe that they exist. To attempt such a proof leads inevitably to the scepticism of Hume. Chesterton seems to have attempted this proof in his youth and writes of it in the *Autobiography*,

"while dull atheists came and explained to me that there was nothing but matter, I listened with a sort of calm horror of detachment, suspecting that there was nothing but mind". To be a sceptic in this way is to be imprisoned in one's own mind.

Chesterton also mentions the cult of realism, which insists on stressing the seamy side of life. Zola was extremely influential for a time, while Ibsen, in such plays as *Ghosts*, opened up the new channels of heredity and the horrors it suggests. The genuine Calvinism of Predestination was fortunately dead, but its influence survived in a few clumsy vetoes and taboos still capable of spoiling the major pleasures of life. *The Way of All Flesh* or Sir Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* show the position of dying Puritanism.

It is against this puritan aspect of Victorianism that the decadents are primarily in revolt. They have all a strong prejudice against religion and common morality, "the seven deadly virtues". Dorian Gray has only to call morality middle class to damn it as effectively as the epithet "bourgeois" nowadays. George Moore tells us how he shook off his belief in Christianity and the "intellectual savagery" of Catholicism at a very early age with the help of Shelley. "It is only

natural for me", he writes, "to oppose the routine of daily thought."

(Pater's statement that life should be a work of art is largely the foundation of the aesthetic cult.) Man, he says, has only a limited time on earth and must exclude from it all but the finest experiences and choicest sensations. These he must cull with the care of an artist. "To burn always with this hard gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy." The New Hedonism of Wilde takes this as its basis. The aim of life is self-development by experience of the finest and subtlest pleasures: you must never repress an impulse, for that is to deny the ego. Dorian Gray sets out on a deliberate search for sensations "that would be at once new and delightful and possess that element of strangeness which is so essential to romance". The hedonist must be eager for every shade of sensation and his criterion must be purely their aesthetic value. "The aesthete was all receptiveness, like the flea", writes Chesterton at the time, in his book on Shaw. "His only affair in the world was to feed on its facts and colours like a parasite upon blood. The ego was the all." This desire for

perpetual novelty inevitably drove them into the strange and exotic when the common experiences had been tried out. George Moore loved exotic plants and furnishings in his chambers, while Dorian Gray passed from rarity to rarity. Sometimes he would collect strange perfumes, sometimes wonderful and bizarre weapons or uncommon jewels. Similarly, when the permissible excitements have been tested one goes into crime and perversity. Beaudelaire had already set the fashion with his corpses and his "affreuse juive", and Moore takes a self-conscious delight in frequenting the lowest haunts of Paris. Dorian Gray, once more, lives among prostitutes and perversity; and Oscar Wilde himself illustrates the belief that "sin is the only colour element in modern life".

Books such as *Dorian Gray* and George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* seem to have filled Chesterton with enormous disgust, and he launches a strong and varied attack on them. Aestheticism is obviously an unsocial creed, and being based on receptivity, an uncreative creed as well. But apart from objective judgments, it is unsatisfactory to those who practise it, he argues, for it is built on faulty psychology. Its aim is to live among perpetual high lights and at unending

emotional crises, but this is an impossibility. The fallacy lies in the fact that "men cannot even enjoy riot when the riot is the rule . . . there is no fun in being lawless when lawlessness is the law". The essence of pleasure is concentration and contrast, for "when everybody's somebody, then no one's anybody". The aesthetes themselves realized this and attempted to vary their pleasures as much as possible, alternating sensations of art with sensations of sensuousness or crime. Nevertheless, pleasure was the end of all and the mind became inevitably sated.

In the same way the doctrine of complete self-gratification is bad psychology. Pleasure must be paid for because part of its very intensity comes from resistance or self-control. To gratify every impulse at once destroys this intensity, as the breaking of a dam reduces all water to the same level. (The moderns, Chesterton writes in 1901, are suffering in "the hell of no resistance" and a "hedonism which is more sick of happiness than an invalid is sick of pain") True pleasure is in its nature exceptional and must be made distinguished by contrast, by repression, by complete self-committal; otherwise the life of the hedonist will be a long monotony. The decadent is like the butterfly; his round of pleasure "need be no



more amusing than a postman's, since he has no serious spiritual interest in any of his places of call". This is the real reason for the boredom of the young men, and for Dorian's loss of desire.

Several positive philosophies were tried expressly to overcome this pessimism, but none were found satisfactory. The Church, as we have already indicated, was in very low water, and Butler estimates in *Erewhon* that ninety per cent of the people regarded it with something not far removed from contempt. There is in place of it a certain revival of Paganism, though of a superficial nature. It is not, however, the genuine nature worship which is at the root of the best pagan beliefs; but rather a reaction from Christian humility and mercy. Springing as it does from a general loss of beliefs it tends to exalt the violent animal virtues of strength and will, and it insists on the beauty of the flesh against Victorianism. Swinburne is its prophet in his *Hymn to Proserpine*:

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean, and the world  
has grown grey from thy breath.

Christianity has driven out the beauty and joy of life with its praise of meekness. George Moore, in the tradition, prefers the "bold fearless gaze of Venus" to the lowered glance of the virgin, and

vindicates the body against Victorian respectability:

The clean pagan nude, a love of life and beauty, the broad fair breast of a boy, the long flanks, the head thrown back.

Chesterton does not suffer from the prudish aspect of Victorianism, and has much sympathy with Paganism. It is good up to a point, because it insists on the worship of natural forces and the beauty of the world, but it is a dangerous philosophy, because there is nothing to prevent it from running to abuse. "There is nothing in Paganism to check its own exaggerations", he writes (*The Well and the Shallows*), and describes in *St Francis* the terrible Priapian orgies to which nature worship descended in the decadence of Rome. What begins as love of life and beauty generally ends in the worship of eroticism or force. This is the invariable history of Paganism, and a fact borne out by its revival in the nineteenth century. Nietzsche's doctrine of the will is a worship of force for its own sake, and George Moore is unpleasantly sadistic. He tells us, if we may refer to the *Confessions* once more, that he kept a python in his rooms and took great pleasure in the "exquisite gourmandize with

which it lubricated and swallowed live guinea pigs". He despised pity, "that most vile of virtues", and wallows melodramatically in the most bloodthirsty visions—"to see the great gladiators pass, to hear them cry the famous 'Ave Caesar', to hold the thumb down, to see the blood flow, to fill the languid hours with the agonies of poisoned slaves". George Moore seems to have been less dangerous in practice than he would have us believe; but it is significant that the *Confessions* ran through several editions and drew a rather flattering comment of "audacious" from Pater.

Apart from this danger, Chesterton points out that Paganism is ultimately a sad religion. Staking all on the beauty and joy of this world, it can offer nothing after. "The Pagan", he writes, "was in the main happier and happier as he approached the earth, but sadder and sadder as he approached the heavens" (*Orthodoxy*). We are reminded of the strain of melancholy which runs through so much of the Greek drama. Paganism results in what Chesterton calls the *carpe diem* philosophy.

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.

But this is not the philosophy of happy men:

"great joy does not gather the rosebuds while it may," he says in *Orthodoxy*, "its eyes are fixed on that immortal rose which Dante saw." Omar Khayyám drinks not out of happiness but because he is very unhappy:

Drink—for once dead you never shall return.

Neither are the Pagan virtues really helpful ones. Temperance and justice are reasonable virtues, and reason can only convince us of our inevitable failure when difficulties are very great. For happiness you need the mystical virtues, such as hope and faith. "The only kind of hope that is any use in a battle is a hope that denies arithmetic." Such is the gist of Chesterton's attitude to Paganism, a position which he defines frequently. He deals more summarily with Nietzsche. The Nietzschean philosophy is a reaction against materialistic determinism, and has considerable influence on Shaw at the beginning of the present century, besides attracting Oscar Wilde. To Chesterton its teaching consists primarily of revolt and the praise of will, though in fact it contains very much more. In *Orthodoxy* he concentrates on these, attacking them from a variety of angles. Nietzsche, he says, praises revolt for its own sake and denies all limitation, when in

practice, to do anything at all is to impose a form of limitation; for every definite action is an exclusion of all other actions; so that the complete denial of limitation is a contradiction in terms. Again, he argues that Nietzsche falsely identifies revolt with the will. All action is a result of will; not to revolt as much as to revolt, and will only becomes distinguished when it produces a distinguished action which need not be a revolt against morality. To praise revolt for its own sake is, indeed, to be paralysed, for if you are in revolt against everything, you cannot revolt in favour of anything. Some of these arguments are perhaps verbal quibblings, but there is truth in the general idea that our revolt must be limited and organized.

Another answer to the pessimism of the time is to be found in the cult of the future which derives from evolution. The air is full of sunny prophecy, and Nietzsche's superman is echoed in Shaw's play and H. G. Wells's giants reared on the food of the gods. The hope of the race depends on eugenics and the present must be sacrificed to the future. Chesterton takes a rather more realistic view of the problem, in *Heretics*. Our knowledge of eugenics is too small to produce any accurate results in the sphere of human relations: you may

produce the body but not the mind. Yet even supposing that the science of eugenics has been sufficiently mastered, the question arises, what kind of a superman do we want? And here the difficulty begins, because no two men agree. Wells desires something generally more altruistic; Shaw has a vague conception of a better body and larger brain, while Nietzsche demands more will. No one indeed can be sufficiently isolated from his own age to see what it really needs. "If you are to breed men as you breed pigs, then you demand a man as much more intelligent than the ordinary man as a man is more intelligent than a pig." In any case, Chesterton points out that it is doubtful whether the superman is any happier. "It is to the ordinary man that odd things seem fantastic. To the extraordinary man, they are simply ordinary."

We must mention also a slight revival of pantheism and oriental philosophy, the danger of which Chesterton seems greatly to have exaggerated. He goes out of his way to refute it in *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*, and writes his fantastic novel *The Flying Inn* as a warning against its acceptance. Possibly the popularity of Omar Khayyám was responsible for his fears, though that owed its contemporary vogue much more to

its pessimism than to its pantheism. Whatever the cause, Chesterton believes that our pessimism may drive us to lose our individualities in a mystical unity with the whole world, and forget our sorrows with ourselves. As a philosophy, pantheism denies the separateness of things, which is to deny love. "I want to adore the world not as one likes a looking glass, because it is oneself," he writes in *Orthodoxy*, "but as one loves a woman because she is entirely different." This is analogous to Aldous Huxley's argument that there must be a strict division between self and not self for love to exist at all.

(In conclusion, something must be said about the optimism of the early 1900's. It is a term which covers many shades of belief from a harassed and hardly-won optimism to the cheapest jingoism. Chesterton begins by calling himself an optimist, on the principle that you cannot go on living unless there is some good in the world. His attitude is based on the very minimum of good, thankfulness for the mere fact of life. At the other extreme there is complete satisfaction with the present, and a denial of all evil, in endless vistas of progress. Wells and Kipling both suffer from this to some extent, and Chesterton attacks them for it. It is obvious that

such complete optimism will prevent reform as effectively as complete pessimism.

This is roughly Chesterton's analysis of thought at the beginning of the century. It is not a complete nor perhaps a fair analysis, but it is the basis of nearly all his subsequent philosophy. He has seized on to the salient point of pessimism and shown how a variety of philosophies contribute to it. It remains to discuss his own solution of the problem in another chapter.



## Chapter II

### *Orthodoxy and the Catholic Church*

(Chesterton came of an agnostic family and was ~~an~~ agnostic socialist in his early years. Consequently he began with an unbiased analysis of the needs of the period, and, working out a philosophy for himself, discovered that he had unwittingly arrived at the position of orthodox Christianity as he tells us in the *Autobiography*, (he sought to be ten years in advance of his times and discovered that he was really nineteen hundred years behind them.) It is convenient, therefore, to approach orthodoxy as he himself did by way of a brief examination of what was really needed. We can then describe the Christian solution.

(The most fundamental need of the age, and especially of the decadent part of it, was the power to appreciate the common inescapable things, and the emotions which all people share.) Love, sentiment, anger; the great truisms "that children are charming, that twilight is sad, or that one man fighting three is a fine sight"—

these are the pith and marrow of our experiences: and unless we can enjoy them, life is not worth living. "It was a problem", Chesterton writes in *Orthodoxy*, "of how men could be made to realize the wonder and splendour of being alive in environments such as their own daily criticism treated as dead alive, and which their imagination had left for dead." For this, you must have humility and the belief that you deserve nothing at all. The world is a gift which may be taken away, and you must accept it with the innocence of the child, not the sophisticated dissatisfaction of the aesthete.

On the other hand, the satisfaction of the complete optimist is equally to be avoided or jingoism will result. There must be at once satisfaction with the world and criticism of it, "the deadly need of this double energy of internal reform and external defence", as Chesterton describes it. Again, there must be a permanent ideal for there to be any standard of progress or morality; and this ideal must contain complexity. Human nature is itself complex. "The sane man knows that he has a touch of the beast, a touch of the devil, a touch of the saint, a touch of the citizen" (*Orthodoxy*). The ideal must allow expression for this human variety and contain no

rational over-simplification. "It must not (if it is to satisfy our souls) be the mere victory of some one thing swallowing up everything else; it must be a definite picture composed of these elements in their best proportion and relation" (*Orthodoxy*). Free will, too, is a necessity of human happiness, for there is no point in having standards of good and evil unless we have active choice. And finally, we must be quite convinced that the world does exist as we see it and is not a fabrication of our own minds.

These are the ingredients of human happiness, and Chesterton early comes to the conclusion that only orthodox Christianity contains them. *The Defendant* is vaguely Christian and *Heretics* in 1904 avowedly criticizes from that position. But it is not until 1908 that we have a systematical defence of orthodoxy in the book of that name. Its purpose is to prove that "The central Christian theology (sufficiently summarized in the Apostles Creed) is the best root of energy and sound ethics".

The first doctrine of orthodoxy is that God created the world and placed man in it. In consequence, life is a gift instead of a right, "a kind of eccentric privilege" for which we owe infinite gratitude. The whole world is dependent on God

and there is everywhere "the sense of the preciousness and fragility of the universe, the sense of being in the hollow of a hand". Chesterton feels very strongly the "pricelessness and peril" of an existence which only continues by the mercy of God.

At the other end, orthodoxy insists on the doctrine of original sin and the corruption of human nature. Man's deserts are nothing after the Fall, and humility is his only course. This scarcely seems a fruitful ground for human happiness; yet it is a paradox that belief in our own worthlessness makes us all the more joyful at what we are given. "All genuine appreciation rests on a certain mystery of humility", Chesterton argues. "By reducing ourselves to a point everything looks very large." Moreover, by destroying the idea of human desert, original sin frees us from the limitation of reward according only to merit. "With the removal of all question of merit or payment", he writes, "the soul is suddenly released for incredible voyages." The mercy of God is so much greater than human desert could ever be, that we are given "palaces of pearl and silver under the oath and seal of the omnipotent". In consequence, Christianity alone has the irrational virtues of faith and hope which,

Chesterton considers to be the most useful ones.

The danger of such doctrines is that they will make man too optimistic. This is indeed the weakness of pantheism, that if God is conceived to be good, the world and man must be good too, however much apparent evil there may be. Orthodox theology guards against this by the separation of the world from God. God created the world separate from himself as an artist fashions a work of art. "All creation is separation, and in making the world God set it free." Thus you can believe that God is good without denying evil in man, and be "at peace with the universe yet be at war with the world". Above all, we can love the world as a patriot loves his country, because it is something small and finite; we can love it unceasingly, as a man loves a woman in misfortune or happiness. Now love is the greatest force for reform. The man who loves anything desires to make it better, for its evil offends him more than it would the indifference of the pessimist. Love, then, a sort of world patriotism, is to be the critical force which prevents too complete an optimism. "If there arose a man who loved Pimlico, then Pimlico would rise into ivory towers and golden pinnacles." In the same way,

the true patriot will show his love for the world by keeping a jealous eye on its evils. There is nothing at all complacent or jingoistic in Chesterton's attitude, and he never attempts to white-wash abuses. Evil, in fact, is an essential part of his scheme. The doctrine of free will gives us the power of choice in good and evil; and the romance of life is in making that choice. Existence is an adventure and a crusade against evil, without which everything is grey. Christianity, by giving man the freedom to gain his own salvation, says: "Drink, for the trumpets are blowing for battle and this is the stirrup cup. Drink, for the whole world is as red as this wine and with the crimson of the love and wrath of God" (*Heretics*).

These doctrines, therefore, satisfy the first needs of man by proving the goodness and wonder of life and yet insisting on the need for criticism, "the need for a first loyalty to things and then a ruinous reform of things" (*Orthodoxy*). Having cleared the way for our appreciation of the world and our attitude to it, orthodoxy provides the necessary ideal by which to regulate our actions. It is symbolized by the Trinity, which implies complexity, "the conception of a sort of liberty and variety existing even in the inmost chamber of the world". The ideal of life laid down by ortho-

doxy is one in which all the human faculties are exercised. In an age which is too spiritual, the Church insists on the value of the flesh and denies the Manichean heresy through the mouth of Aquinas, "the great and horrible heresy that there can be such a thing as a spiritual religion". Nowadays the Church with equal vigour defends spiritual values at a time when they are ignored. Man contains these conflicting extremes and rationalism would abolish one or the other for the sake of consistency, explaining all action in terms of matter or of spirit. But orthodoxy would preserve all, believing that they are all equally necessary to a complete and happy life. If there is an apparent contradiction between body and mind, for example, we must accept it in the certainty of fuller happiness. "The ordinary man . . . if he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other would take the two truths and the contradiction along with them. His spiritual sight is stereoscopic like his physical sight; he sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that" (*Orthodoxy*). This mystical acceptance of contradiction must be extended to all the qualities of human nature, to love and hate, pride and humility, courage and meekness. All are natural to man and must be allowed expression. "It is

exactly this balance of apparent contradictions that has been the whole buoyancy of the healthy man."

All these contradictory qualities are in themselves virtues and yet tend to destroy each other. The function of the Church, therefore, is to provide a sort of chart assigning a particular province to every one within the limits of which it may function freely. "Christianity demands not that joy and anger shall neutralize each other", writes Chesterton, "but a fiercer delight and a fiercer anger. We want not a compromise, but both things at the top of their energy: love and wrath, both burning" (*Orthodoxy*). Every virtue is encouraged, but its sphere of action rigidly defined "to prevent either of these good things from ousting the other". For example, we must love the sinner unto seventy times seven but hate the sin beyond all forgiveness; we must be infinitely proud that we are made in God's image, and aggressive in defence of our doctrine; but we must be infinitely humble in that we are only men, and ever aware of human weakness. "The Church says 'here you can swagger, there you can grovel'." Such an order prevents any one virtue from driving out all the rest and so preserves them all. Within the framework of



orthodoxy there is freedom for all the good things of life. "The outer ring of Christianity is a rigid guard of ethical abnegations and professional priests: but inside that inhuman guard you will find the old human life dancing like children and drinking wine like men: for Christianity is the only frame for Pagan freedom" (*Orthodoxy*).

On this is based the orthodox definition of heresy, which is one Christian virtue escaping from its proper sphere and swallowing up all the rest. "What is to prevent any humanist wanting chastity without humility, and another, humility without chastity, and another, truth or beauty without either?" Chesterton asks in *The Thing*. "The problem of an enduring ethic and culture consists in finding an arrangement of the pieces by which they remain related." Calvinism, for example, is one theological truth, the power of God, which has been allowed to drive out the doctrine of free will or of mercy. The result is the heresy of Predestination. Communism, again, is an exaggerated idea of the equality and brotherhood of men which has, in its turn, driven out everything else. The Manichean heresy was an exaggeration of the spirit and so a denial of the flesh. Most of the current philosophies are Christian virtues grown into heresies, and

Chesterton's book *Heretics* is an examination of Kipling, Wells, George Moore and various other contemporaries from that point of view.

Heresy is therefore a desperately dangerous thing, for it affects the whole balance of life. And Chesterton describes the function of the Church towards it in most stirring language:

It was no flock of sheep the Christian shepherd was leading, but a herd of bulls and tigers, of terrible ideals and devouring doctrines, each one of them strong enough to turn to a false religion and lay waste the world.

It is interesting to note in passing a surprising similarity between Chesterton's conception of orthodoxy and the system of a very different writer, Aldous Huxley. Huxley too believes that happiness and sanity rest in a balance of conflicting virtues, but he rejects the orthodox chart for keeping them all in their proper places. He believes that any exaggeration will inevitably correct itself, and man, being sated by too much of one extreme, will go over to the other. Exaggeration of sensuousness will be automatically corrected by a reaction over to asceticism or mental activity. But this ignores the force of habit and gives the average man a greater sense of

balance than he probably possesses. History upholds Chesterton's defence of the doctrine of heresy.

It has already been indicated how orthodoxy avoids the dangers of pantheism by teaching the separation of the world from God. We may conclude by pointing out that in this fact lies the Christian answer to scepticism. If the world was created, it must exist in reality and not merely in our sense impressions. "I enjoy stars and the sun or trees and the sea because they exist in spite of me" (*The Uses of Diversity*). The Church always insists on form, which is the objectification of things. As Chesterton amusingly puts it:

St Nicholas brings three children alive out of a vat when they had already been boiled down into soup; which may be said to mark the extreme assertion of form against formlessness (*Sidelights on New London and Newer York*).

This is Chesterton's definition of Christian orthodoxy, and it appears to solve all the problems stated earlier, making for contentment, progress and the fullest self-expression. The question arises, why not accept the ethics of orthodoxy but ignore the religion? Chesterton replies that orthodoxy has an undying quality

which suggests its divinity: it has the answer to the modern heresies of communism and evolution as effectively as when it opposed Calvinism or the Manichees. "The Christian Church in its practical relation to my soul is a living teacher, not a dead one." But as this might be due to the Church's wider knowledge of human nature, Chesterton attacks the problem from the other end, with a consideration of the supernatural. His main argument is based on the need for a first cause. We know no reason, he says, why trees should bear fruit, and a study of the seed and blossom reveals only the process, not the cause. We assume an inevitable causation between the planting of a tree and its bearing fruit, because the two have always gone together, yet the one does not explain the other. "Scientists feel that because one incomprehensible thing inevitably follows another incomprehensible thing the two together somehow make up a comprehensible thing." What is a mere association of ideas we call an explanation. Nor is that association inevitable in the sense that one and two making three is inevitable, because you cannot imagine one and two making anything else, but you can imagine fruit trees not bearing fruit. The logic of this seems uncertain, for a tree which does not

bear fruit is not strictly a fruit tree, so that it is doubtful if we can imagine such a situation. Nevertheless, the general thesis is true, that the immediate material cause is not a full explanation of a phenomenon, and it is perfectly reasonable to look on nature as a perpetual miracle by the hand of God. There is no reason for the sun to rise unless God makes it so. "I always vaguely felt facts to be miracles in the stricter sense that they were wilful", we are told in *Orthodoxy*. "I mean that they were or might be repeated exercises of some will." Man is grateful for every other gift. Is there no one to whom he can be grateful for the gift of life?

Chesterton's defence of miracles is on similar lines. We begin nowadays with an unconscious materialist assumption that miracles are impossible. Yet in fact they are a question of evidence like everything else, and in some cases, though not in all, the evidence is irrefutable.

The case for Christianity is very convincing and eminently reasonable. Chesterton says, looking back on his own conversion, "I am unable to imagine any human being accepting any authority that he has not originally reached by reason" (*As I was Saying*).

It remains to discuss the relationship between

the Roman Catholic Church and the doctrines of orthodoxy. To Chesterton the difference is purely one of discipline: both teach the same things, but the Church has a completer machinery for enforcing them. Quite apart from the Apostolic succession, the Papacy is the best conservator of truth because it is the only impartial power in the world. While heretical creeds have risen up to destroy each other, the Church has clung to its unchanging doctrines and has in consequence a wider, more systematic knowledge of the world than anything else. "A Catholic... has all the range of two thousand years full of twelve hundred thousand controversies thrashed out by thinker against thinker." With so much experience and tradition the Church is wiser than any man, quicker to detect heresy and more capable of escaping from the tyranny of fashion. Nor is its machinery more repressive than its doctrines. The Confession is accompanied by pardon, which is more than can be said of psychoanalysis: while the great Church feasts, such as Christmas, satisfy man's instinct for pleasure by providing periodical outbursts which are all the intenser for being occasional. On the other hand, the Church allows asceticism, provided it is of the proper kind. The ascetic must be like St Francis,

so grateful for life, that he forgoes a large part of it, feeling the need for some great sacrifice to express his gratitude. That asceticism which is based on a hatred of the flesh is a deadly heresy.

The asceticism of the Dark Ages is justified on the grounds that it was a purgation for the abuses of Paganism in its decadence. In the *Life of St Francis*, Chesterton argues that the natural forces and joys of life had become polluted by the orgies, the Bacchanalian revels and unnatural lusts of the later Paganism, so that some great abstinence was necessary to purify them and make them sweet again for the enjoyment of man. St Francis comes at the end of this purification, the first figure to teach that life is beautiful and innocent once more; while St Thomas Aquinas is the philosopher of this new joy in life, justifying the rights of the flesh.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note in passing a striking similarity between Chesterton's *Life of St Francis* and T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* which states the same theme of purification by abstinence. Eliot writes in the fourth poem of *Ash Wednesday*:

"Here are the years that walk between, bearing  
 Away the fiddles and the flutes, restoring  
 One who moves in the time between sleep and waking, wearing  
 White light folded, sheathed about her, folded.  
 The new year's walk, restoring  
 Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring  
 With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem  
 The time. . . ."

But the Church is for ordinary men, not saints, and includes every type in its tolerant system. It uses its saints as patterns of individual virtues "symbolizing purity by the complete absence of sex" but imposing its dogma to prevent such asceticism from becoming too popular. It is perhaps the only Church which cares for the sinner as much as the saint. Chesterton's defence of the Roman Catholic Church is as reasonable as his defence of orthodoxy, yet it is more difficult to accept. Once a doctrine takes on human flesh, in the form of the priesthood, it takes on human

The similarity seems more than accidental in such passages as

"The silent sister veiled in white and blue,  
Between the yews, behind the garden god  
Whose flute is breathless. ."

or "Forgetting themselves and each other, united  
In the quiet of the desert. ."

There are almost verbal echoes of a passage on the same theme in *St Francis*:

"Let anyone who knows a little Latin poetry recall suddenly  
... what sort was their god of gardens",

writes Chesterton.

"It was no good telling such people to have a natural religion full of stars and flowers, there was not a flower or even a star that had not been stained. They had to go into the desert where they could find no flowers...."\*

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\* I am indebted for this suggestion to Miss E. Welsford, M.A., of Newnham College, Cambridge.



fallibility as well; and though it is perhaps reasonable to accept the authority of the priest, since he is more closely in touch with the central doctrines than we can be; yet we inevitably distrust an authority coming through a man no different from ourselves. The Church has made mistakes in the past, though no more than any temporal authority. It is not without significance that Chesterton did not go over to Rome till relatively late in his life, in the early 1920's.

We have described the general plan of Chesterton's religion, and some estimate of its value seems necessary. It is not proposed to enter upon a discussion of Roman Catholicism in general, in this place, but it may be of value to analyse the elements of the case which are peculiar to Chesterton himself and not inherent in the religion.

In the first place Chesterton is in a long line of Catholic polemicists, and uses many old arguments. His attack on too great a belief in human reason was the chief defence of Catholic authority in the seventeenth century, though it must be admitted that its application in support of paradox seems completely new. His outline of orthodox doctrine is, of course, not original; and we are reminded of Newman's *Idea of a University*, which

contains a similar account. There is to be a ring of sciences, each functioning within its own sphere: while theology states the boundaries of each.

Chesterton's polemic, moreover, is a weakening of his argument, for it leads him generally to understate the case of his opponent and so triumph a little too lightly. In addition it is the cause of a certain inconsistency in his theory. For example, his early optimism was a very uncertain thing based on the belief that you must be thankful for anything you are given since you deserve nothing at all. It is making the best of a bad job, when contemporary pessimism is making the worst of it. A strain of this continues on into orthodoxy, where this joy from humility is grafted on to the old pagan passions, blazing at full strength within the Christian ring, but it is doubtful whether the Christian pleasures are identical with the pagan, which depend to some extent on consciousness of desert.

This is, however, a very minor point. The real problem with which Chesterton is faced is to convince anyone who is not already a believer. He is indeed in a vicious circle. You cannot believe until you have experienced the pleasures which spring from the outwardly forbidding Christian dogmas; and you cannot experience

those pleasures until you have the Christian humility. Most people would admit that it is necessary to impose some kind of pattern on our various impulses; but only one who has tried it can tell whether the orthodox balance of conflicting extremes is the satisfactory one, and whether the passions of love and hatred can, for example, blaze side by side in the provinces allotted to them by that scheme. It is a question indeed of whether Catholic morality is feasible in detail. Chesterton realizes this and admits that the book *Orthodoxy* is a record of his own progress rather than an infallible guide to others. One feels all the time that orthodoxy in spite of its general reasonableness is yet a very personal religion and might produce quite different results in someone else. T. E. Hulme, for example, was an orthodox Catholic; yet original sin produced quite the opposite effect in him, filling him with depression instead of joy. Again, love, the great reforming force of life, might be a less progressive, more reactionary, influence to someone who lacked Chesterton's overwhelming love of the poor, for if you love anything you are as likely to excuse as to reform the evil in it.

We come to the conclusion therefore that orthodoxy, though the only creed for Chesterton,

is not necessarily the only creed for mankind, though this may be a criticism of mankind. Chesterton's character enabled him to believe more completely and to gain the fullest happiness out of his religion. He seems like Wordsworth to have been an extraordinary child and to have been influenced by his childhood for the rest of his life. He retains to the end a childlike sense of wonder and of the freshness of the commonest things. His perception never becomes dulled by familiarity, and he never loses "the child's love of the toughness of wood, the wetness of water, and the magnificent soapiness of soap". His world is as romantic as a fairy story, full of vivid and startling objects inexplicably grouping themselves into patterns. Life is too wonderful to be anything but magic, and the very repetition of things is a proof of design. One elephant with its absurd trunk is a wildly amusing sight, he writes somewhere; but for all elephants to have trunks suggests a conspiracy. He is everywhere haunted by the sense of a divine hand performing the miracles of ordinary life. "I had always believed that the world involved magic", he says in *Orthodoxy*. "Now I thought that perhaps it involved a magician."

It is obvious that such a sensibility would be

inevitably inclined towards religion. If life is so miraculous, it is natural to be grateful for it and to believe in a God who ordained it. Chesterton's religion, like Traherne's, is the result of an extreme sensitivity which is beyond the power of ordinary men. It is his strength that he joins the Church out of a positive and joyful belief in its doctrines and not as a rock on which to cling in a storm-tossed generation.

### Chapter III

#### *Political Beliefs*

It is Chesterton's perpetual argument that all modern virtues were originally Christian, even if they have disowned the parent stock and become heresies. The fundamental assumption of humanism, that man is by nature noble, really derives from the idea of man created in God's image. "All this talk about the divinity and dignity of the human body is stolen from theology", he writes in *All is Grist*. "It dates from the Garden of Eden and the idea that God created man in his own image." More than this, by the Incarnation where God himself became small and took on human shape, man's very weakness is made sacred. Christianity was therefore the first religion to attack slavery because it is a denial of liberty, "the God in Man". The humanitarian political creeds of the moderns are all based on this fundamental theological assumption and there is no reason for the principles of communism or of democracy without it. The rights of man are built on Christianity.

But in spite of man's godlike aspect, the world is obviously full of evil, which the Church explains by the doctrine of the Fall. "In so far as I am man, I am the chief of creatures. In so far as I am a man, I am the chief of sinners" (*Orthodoxy*). All men are gods, but all men are also subject to ordinary human limitations. In consequence, the common inescapable things of life are the most important, the fact of birth, of death and of common emotions; and no man is so great that he can transcend them. As Chesterton puts it in *Heretics*: "The things on which men agree are so immeasurably more important than the things on which they disagree, that the latter, for all practical purposes, disappear." From this is derived the doctrine of the equality of men. By their greatness all men are equal, for all are the image of God; by their weakness all men are equal, for no one can escape the fundamental problems of life. Man is too dependent on his fellows to be superior to them; his need for comradeship can only be satisfied by his equals.

But another consequence of man's humanity is a certain proneness to error as a result of pride. "Satan fell by the force of gravity", and a man is all the more likely to fall by being elevated above his fellows. "To be rich is to be in peculiar danger

of moral wreck", writes Chesterton in *Orthodoxy*, and argues that the poor are generally better men than the rich, because less open to temptation. You may not trust the despot or the demagogue.

A final aspect of human weakness is the limited nature of human liberty. True liberty is not the sheer unlimited revolt of Nietzsche but a limited revolt in favour of something, a power to turn limitation to our own use rather than abolish it. "While the joy of God must be unlimited creation, the special joy of man is limited, the combination of creation with limits. Man's pleasure, therefore, is to possess conditions but also to be partly possessed by them, to be controlled by the flute he plays or by the field he digs. The excitement is to get the utmost out of given conditions" (*What's Wrong with the World*). It is the freedom that an artist has within the limits of his medium.

We have therefore two essential aspects of human nature which society must observe. There is first man's divine right to liberty and fair government, and secondly his human weakness, which makes him equal with his fellows, liable to err if exalted above them, and only capable of loving and controlling anything adequately if it is of limited size. These are the fundamental necessities. What political system is best suited to them?



This question is discussed in *What's Wrong with the World*, and Chesterton replies that democracy is the most satisfactory form of government.

Democracy insists, in the first place, on the rights of man—government by the people for the people, but it recognizes human weakness and denies the rule of the despot on the grounds of original sin. Its aim is to make the average man govern because he is least affected with pride and consequently with sin. "Democracy means getting those people to vote who would never have the cheek to govern and (according to Christian ethics) the precise people who ought to govern are the people who have not the cheek to do it." Accordingly democracy is less likely to become corrupt than oligarchy, but it is still by no means secure. "Be a democrat if you like," Chesterton writes in *The Well and the Shallows*, "express your sense of human dignity in manhood suffrage or any other form of equality, but put not your trust in manhood suffrage or any child of man." Nevertheless, it is the best that man can devise and Chesterton upholds it vigorously. He attacks the specialist in all forms; for specialization is a denial of the average. The despot is the specialist in government who may be quite sincere and honest but is none the less

likely to err. As a specialist he is different from those he governs and so cannot represent them. Neither can he understand them completely or pay proper respect to their individual strengths and weaknesses, while as a specialist he will inevitably lose his sense of proportion. There is a fine essay in *Tremendous Trifles* on this point, in which Chesterton defends the jury system against the single legal adjudicator. The specialist loses sight of everything outside his subject, and familiarity with it often breeds contempt, or at least insufficient reverence for it.

It can be seen that democracy protects man's rights and his equality. What of his freedom? This is protected by two institutions which are the stronghold of democratic ideas, private property and the home. Private property means that every man should have something to shape to his own liking; it is "the art of democracy", but it must be a small property. A man can love a small property as he can never love a large one; he may like to own it for the status or the wealth it brings him; but he can be personally interested only in a small piece of property, something which he is capable of working, and organizing directly himself. He will deal with it as an artist deals with his materials, and have the true joy of struggle and

creation. "The man standing in his own kitchen garden with Fairyland opening at the gate is the man with large ideas. His mind creates distance." Liberty is "the power to be oneself", that is, to exercise all our faculties to the fullest extent; and we can only express ourselves by what we actually do. The really free man, therefore, possesses unlimited powers over something small. He paints one picture instead of possessing many; he lives one limited life instead of describing many, like the dramatist Phineas Salt in *The Poet and the Lunatics*; he moulds and shapes his kitchen garden instead of owning large acres for other people to work. The small property owner will love the very boundaries of his estate as an artist loves his colours and his canvas, for they are the materials of creation. "A man with the true poetry of possession wishes to see the garden wall where his garden meets Smith's garden." All true love is a love of limits.

Similarly, the home is a sphere of purely voluntary action in which man is not only a citizen, but a king. In public he has to conform to the laws of society; but in the home there is the minimum of state interference. It is "the one place where he can put the carpet on the ceiling. A man can only picnic at home". It is the only place in which he

can establish his own laws to fit the individual case; where he can establish a Court of Beacon as in *Manalive*. Here, too, there is unlimited power over a small area. Monogamy, on which the home is based, is a further example of this definition of freedom. It is not within the limits of human power to love more than one woman completely, for to love fully is to give everything one has. Marriage, therefore, offers a richer and more satisfactory relationship than free love. "So long as you have one good wife, you are sure to have a spiritual harem."

Democracy, of all political systems, alone satisfies the varied needs of human nature. Yet in the 1890's there was a considerable movement against it and a widespread distaste for these ordinary values. Sir Henry Wootton in *Dorian Gray* considers common morality as dull and cramping. "Joy has been killed by beer and the seven deadly virtues", and the world is dying of "a sort of creeping common sense". Marriage is a bad habit and monogamy a sign of shallowness or lethargy. Chesterton makes a great onslaught on this attitude and attempts to prove that morality and the generally accepted institutions are in fact the most romantic things in the world. Civilization does not fetter the will or crush out

the Dionysiac element of man's character. It is itself the product of revolt, and demands a constant battle against original sin for its preservation. It is indeed far more difficult and exciting to be moral than to be immoral. "Civilization itself is the most romantic of rebellions", he says in *The Defendant*, "we live in an armed camp making war with a chaotic world. Morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies." In the same way marriage is a more varied and exciting experience than free love because it is a vow and hence both a gamble and a challenge. Without it you live among cliques and only encounter people like yourself, which is the most monotonous of existences. But by marriage you bind yourself into the company of the unknown, the different sex, the children and the relations; and you are forced to make varied contacts.

But these reasons in defence of the home and property are really only rationalizations of an ultimate religious attitude of mind. The laws of society are the most satisfactory and provide the greatest happiness; but they are also the product of the laws of God and a type of the nature of the world, which is to be fruitful and to be free. "The man who makes an orchard where there has been a field"; the man who founds a family "is imposing

his will upon the world in the manner of the charter given him by the will of God: he is asserting that his soul is his own. . . he is worshipping the fruitfulness of the world. . . by participation in a great creative process: even in the everlasting creation of the world" (*The Well and the Shallows*).

Such is the theory of democracy. In practice it does not exist in the modern world. It rose in its modern form with the French Revolution, but has been driven out by capitalism, which sprung up with industrialism at the same period. In fact, the modern government does not truly represent the common people, for it is not drawn from their ranks. It costs too much for a poor man to be elected, yet his class should be represented. Moreover, the people have no real say in their own government, because elections are generally fought over "irrelevant issues" such as foreign policy. The political parties offer two or three choices of policy for which a man must vote. "He can choose how he will vote, but not what he will vote about" (*A Miscellany of Men*). Government policy, too, is concerned chiefly with imperialism, especially in the earlier years of the century, and this is a denial of the deepest democratic principles. In the first place it denies the

equality of man by imposing our standards on another nation, yet learning nothing of theirs. In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, the Ex-President of the recently appropriated Nicaragua points out that "the great cosmopolitan civilization which shall include all the talents of all the absorbed peoples" means in practice that we teach our colonies to speak English but do not ourselves learn to lasso wild horses. Secondly, it is a denial of true liberty, which consists in power over small things. A man cannot love anything so large as an empire, and the true patriot who really loves his country objects to any addition to it. "Great Empires are necessarily prosaic, for it is beyond human power to act a great poem upon so great a scale." A result of imperialism, consequently, is a decline of patriotism and the growth of pacificism, which is simply a denial that anything is worth fighting for. "As soon as you love a thing, the whole world becomes your foe." Chesterton's analysis of pacificism identifies it with indifference; but we may note in passing that he has become a little more tolerant since the Barbarians of Berlin destroyed the romance of war. The sword makes things beautiful, but the same cannot be said of the machine gun. Nevertheless, he points out very aptly of modern politics that

"Hitler and Mussolini are not likely to ruin all their plans because a quaker does not propose to interfere with them". Because it is human to err, we must do battle for the right.

This is Chesterton's rather depressing review of political conditions, and since unhappiness and insecurity are the obvious results, he analyses the main reasons for our acceptance of such a state. The chief obstacles to reform are capitalism and the state of mind induced by the theory of evolution, and more particularly, the Darwinian hypothesis of the survival of the fittest. According to Darwin life may have evolved and various species survived by adapting themselves to their environment. The effect of such a theory on human conditions will be for man to adapt himself to his conditions instead of subduing them to himself. In *Tremendous Trifles* Chesterton writes: "Man need not trouble to alter conditions: conditions will so soon alter men." We are reminded of H. G. Wells's *Time Machine*, in which industrialism eventually produces a race of morons who work the machines and live underground. The result is that we begin from the wrong end. Instead of building our social system on the rights of man we take the present system and try to fit into it. We have put trade in the place of truth; we "make



modern conditions an absolute end and then try to fit human necessities to that end, as if they were only means. Thus people say 'Home life is not suited to the business life of today', which is as if they said 'Hats are not suited to the sort of hats now in fashion'" (*Generally Speaking*). This Chesterton calls "thinking backwards" or putting out the fire because it spoils the poker. Our sense of values is quite inverted. He quotes as an example the case of slum children who have dirty hair which the doctors decree to be cut off. In a great piece of rhetoric he charges them with abolishing the hair when they ought to abolish the slums. They are thinking backwards and forgetting that the Sabbath was made for man.

This false standard of values is supported by the whole evolutionary idea which equates the survival of the fittest with an inevitable progress. The result is to produce such phrases as "You can't put the clock back". "We are subconsciously dominated by the notion that there is no turning back" (*Eugenics and Other Evils*). Capitalism naturally avails itself of such a philosophy to persuade people that industrialism on its modern plan is indeed inevitable, and to break up all means of resisting it. "It is the most profound popular impression", he writes in *Fancies versus*

*Fads*, "that scientific materialism at the end of its hundred years is found to have been used chiefly for the oppression of the people. Of this, the most evident example is that evolution itself can be offered as something able to evolve a people who can be oppressed." Capitalism has done its best to force life into a fixed framework of employment and to destroy the independence of the home and private property. The whole method of modern finance is a denial of private property, for it is based not on the possession but on the sale of things, and a man grows apples to sell, not to eat. Capitalism has destroyed the self-supporting peasant type by its "ghastly abstractions and wild unrealities" of speculation and finance. Similarly, it has attacked the home in its attempt to make the factory the centre of life. Originally it encouraged large families for the sake of surplus labour, but now that the surplus is becoming dangerously large, it encourages birth control to weaken the family bond. For the same reason it cherishes divorce and free love for the masses; and Chesterton's chief attack on divorce is based on the argument that it will weaken the home and destroy the last refuge of liberty (*The Superstition of Divorce*). "If there be any class loyalty or domestic discipline by which the poor can help

the poor, these emancipators will certainly strive to loosen that bond or lift that discipline in the most liberal fashion." Finally, capitalism smiles on the science of eugenics in the hope of producing a more industrialized race; and we might add from a study of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* that it smiles on psychology too.

All these factors unite to convince the world that capitalism and industrialism are inevitable: modern machinery is here to stay, and you can't put the clock back. Chesterton's answer to this is quite simply that you can put the clock back. Man has free will and produced the present system by his own efforts; so that it is not a question at all of whether certain states are inevitable, but whether they are right or wrong. "Society being a piece of human construction can be reconstructed upon any plan that has ever existed" (*What's Wrong with the World*). The aim of society is human happiness, and if industrialism does not produce happiness, then it can be scrapped and a different system tried. It may not be advisable to destroy machinery and live on the land, but "Mankind has as much right to scrap its machinery and live on the land, if it really likes it better, as any man has to sell his old bicycle and go for a walk if he likes it better" (*Outline of Sanity*).

The French are a case in point. Disliking their system they abolished it, turned back in their steps, and built a new system on first principles. If the slums lead to dirty hair we must abolish the slums not cut off the hair: if capitalism leads to the destruction of the home and small private property, we must build a new society round these, instead of abolishing them altogether to prevent their abuse, as the socialists would do.

Chesterton is, therefore, a revolutionist, hating compromise as he hates pink. Revolution gives you a clean slate with which to start over again from first principles. It is "the only quite clean and complete road to anything.... Most thoroughly bad processes are slow and sleepy." It seems strange that so great a lover of tradition should also believe in revolution, yet the two are not inconsistent. The noblest and truest ideals have been propounded in the past by a more Christian England and abandoned by later generations on account of their difficulty. The mediaeval state was a better and saner attempt than ours to solve the social problems because it was founded more firmly on private property and the family. The serfs were on the land and necessary to it: the artificers owned their tools and man was generally more self-supporting.

Trade and capitalism have destroyed the guild and the peasant, but the idea still lingers on in popular tradition, the festivities of Christmas or the immemorial rites of the Inn. Tradition is in fact the popular way of preserving great ideals: and the common people are wiser than the intellectuals who abolish them. Revolution as Chesterton sees it would go straight back to the ideal thus preserved.

It can be seen that a fixed ideal, and a sudden revolution for it, is the antithesis of the slow inevitable evolution resulting from the survival of the fittest. Man differs from animal in this very fact, that his consciousness has enabled him to change his environment to suit himself. There is nothing deterministic in his history. "The question for brave men is not whether a certain thing is increasing. The question is whether we are increasing it" (*All Things Considered*). In consequence Chesterton does all he can to discredit the scientific value of the Darwinian hypothesis. How can a creature transmit to its offspring a wing which is useless because only half evolved? he asks. And he even suggests that the survival of the fittest does not mean that creatures produce new characteristics to enable them to survive, but that those creatures which already

had the longer beaks or the stronger wings did in fact survive. Again he is constantly arguing that the difference between animal and human intellect is too great to be explained by anything but the creation of God. It is, however, the philosophic and social effects of the theory to which Chesterton primarily takes objection; and he admits in *Orthodoxy* that evolution may have been God's way of producing man; a miracle is none the less a miracle for occurring slowly. But the laws of the animal world must not be allowed to influence man, who is a totally different species.

In support of his criticism Chesterton puts forward an alternative scheme of society which he claims to be practicable because it observes the fundamental needs of human nature. He calls it Distributivism. Like socialism, it is a denial of capitalism, but it is not the heir to capitalism. Socialism accepts all the capitalist standards and pushes them to their logical conclusion to avoid abuse. Because capitalism has taken private property out of the hands of the many and given it to the few, socialism takes it from the few and abolishes it all together; and when capitalism has attempted to make the home subordinate to industrialism, socialism turns the whole state into

a factory. It is the supreme case of thinking backwards.

Distributivism, on the contrary, is based on the need for "this small human omnipotence, this possession of a definite cell or chamber of liberty". Its foundation is small private ownership, and especially ownership of the land on the model of the mediaeval or modern French peasant. "My general thesis is that small properties should be revived", he writes in the *Outline of Sanity*. Society will be self-supporting as much as possible and the peasant will produce for his own use as well as for sale. The paper abstractions of high finance, of stocks and shares, will be replaced by realities which do not vanish at the slightest loss of confidence. Machinery will not be destroyed but limited to utilitarian uses, and the modern cult of speed will be attacked—"going from nowhere to nowhere in the shortest possible time". Industry will be run on a sort of guild system by which everyone has a share in the ownership but will be prevented from making it too large. Big organizations owned by the few will be replaced by small organizations owned by many, for "large organization is loose organization". It will be essentially the age of the small shop supplying personal customers, and people

will no longer be forced to buy standardized goods. Similarly, local government will predominate, and the people will have a direct hand in governing themselves. Finally, education will be in the home rather than in the state or public school, so that individuality will be preserved to the fullest extent. Such a society would satisfy the human desire for possession and true liberty. It might make society poorer, but it would make it happier, which is the right true end of government. "If we can make men happier, it does not matter if we make them poorer: it does not matter if we make them less productive: it does not matter if we make them less progressive" (*Outline of Sanity*). The nearest approach to its fulfilment was the mediaeval state with its guild and its manorial system. Like William Morris, Chesterton finds in mediaevalism a social principle and a rather radical outlook.

Some general estimate of the value of Chesterton's political beliefs seems necessary in conclusion. We can find many weaknesses in the argument. Distributivism, for example, does not suggest that everyone should go back to the land; but it probably over-estimates the popularity of such a course, and the personal happiness to be gained from it. Moreover, it ignores the large



amount of manufacture which would still have to be carried on to exchange for our imports of food, since the population of England is too large by far to be self-supporting on the land. Again, Chesterton overlooks the fact that industrialism has led to many modern luxuries which have contributed to a fuller happiness. He oversimplifies too, when he identifies socialism with the total industrialization of the state. Socialism is rather a method of doing the necessary manufacture as quickly and efficiently as possible to give the ordinary person the maximum of comfort and spare time. Similarly, Chesterton paints the capitalists far blacker than they are in his sympathy for the poor. For example, he argues that it is invariably in the interests of capitalism to pay low wages, yet it is equally obvious that the worker will buy more if he is paid a higher wage.)

That the dice is heavily loaded can be plainly seen, and yet our objections are of detail rather than principle. It cannot be too strongly insisted on, for example, that the world is not going any particular way of its own accord and that no political system is inevitable unless we make it so. There is a widespread tendency to think of history in terms of large inescapable movements, to ignore completely the human will. It is

common, in consequence, to do insufficient justice to the liberties of the present system, to assume that capitalism must become more repressive, in defiance of historical fact, or that communism must of force evolve from it. The result is often a policy of aggravating the evils of the present in the hope of a hypothetical future. You must encourage abuses so that they may bring about their own ruin: you must never think of attacking them as they stand. There is also a disquieting optimism in both communist and fascist extremes which is prepared to trust all the power in the hands of an oligarchy. Chesterton's defence of democratic liberty is based on a more realistic knowledge of human weakness.

(But perhaps Chesterton's most admirable quality as a political thinker is his love of people in the concrete. He shares with Dickens and the masses on Bank holiday "that positive pleasure in being in the presence of any other human being".) He is for ever making strange acquaintances, talking to his barber or an out-of-work photographer, or children in a Flemish cottage. His love of the city is both a cause and a result of his desire to be rubbing shoulders with his fellow-men. In consequence, he does understand the point of view of the individual person, and

realizes the terrible over-simplification of those who deal with "humanity" at large and men in the mass. A phrase like "the workers" instead of the old-fashioned "workman" produces a scathing description of "a vast grey horde of people apparently all exactly alike, like ants, who are always on the march somewhere, presumably to the Ninth or Tenth International" (*As I was Saying*). "The most important thing about a workman is that he is man", he continues. You cannot generalize about society because it presents a mass of individual problems, and the only reasonable course is to leave it as much liberty as possible to solve them for itself. It is easy to love humanity at large, but a far more difficult task to love your next door neighbour, who is not a man but an environment. "He is the barking of a dog: he is the noise of a pianola: he is drains that are worse than yours, or roses that are better than yours" (*The Uses of Diversity*). In dealing with social problems, therefore, you must begin with the individual, "the actual man or woman in the street who is cold". Chesterton always insists, in consequence, on the need for the small political unit in which the individual is not lost; and he invariably defends the liberty of the individual man against any kind of generalization, whether

it takes the form of capitalism with its laws, or science and its compulsory sanitations.

To complete this survey, a few points must be made about Chesterton's attitude to women. Chesterton's main work on the position of woman was written in 1910 before female suffrage had come into force, and at the height of the suffragette movement, so that *What's Wrong with the World* has a polemical quality which leads to an unfortunate confusion of issues. It contains a discussion of two separate problems; whether woman shall have the vote, and whether she shall be allowed the freedom of man to carve a career for herself in public life. It is assumed that these two problems are the same and that woman will desert the home if she receives the vote; but in actual fact, events have not justified this assumption, and we can consider the two problems separately.

Careers for women is the more important problem and to be considered first. As in his examination of democracy (Chesterton begins by examining the psychology of woman to discover what mode of life really suits her. He decides that she is essentially different from man.) Man is by nature wasteful, content to do things for the mere enjoyment without producing anything. "There

is an element of fine fruitlessness about male enjoyments" (*What's Wrong with the World*). Woman, on the other hand, is essentially thrifty: she loves to produce a result, to put everything to some use. For example, a man argues with another man not to convince him but "to enjoy at once the sound of his own voice, the clearness of his own opinions and the sense of masculine society". A woman, on the other hand, argues to produce a definite result and crush her opponent.

In addition to this, man has the gregarious instinct to a greater degree. He loves comradeship and getting together in crowds with other men, unlike woman who has a natural dignity which leads her to isolation. Consequently, (man) prefers the public house, woman the private house. >

It follows from these qualities that public life is better suited to masculine nature, while the home affords the fullest expression for woman. She is happiest there, and finds that it is indeed a much more romantic and exciting existence than a position in business. The home puts a woman in complete control of a small area and so encourages the essentially creative pleasures of thrift, the power to use things and produce a result. "Thrift is poetic because it is creative: waste is unpoetic

because it is waste" (*What's Wrong with the World*). The family life is, in addition, more varied than the business life. In place of one commonplace job, pushing a pen, selling something or "greasing a wheel, for somebody else who is cornering steel", the home offers unlimited variety of cooking, organizing, the care and education of the children. Chesterton marvels "how it can be a large career to tell other people's children about the rule of three, and a small career to tell one's own children about the universe". The life of the home is, indeed, the life of the amateur, opposed to that of the specialist. By the social pressure man has to be a specialist to earn a living; but freed from this by the protection of marriage, woman retains the ideal of "comprehensive capacity". She cooks, she teaches and organizes, none of them as well as a specialist perhaps, but all of them adequately. She retains many-sidedness. Now the whole tendency of our economic system is to drive man into greater and greater specialization so that he can retain his place in the struggle of competition. It is therefore absolutely necessary for the sanity and proportion of the race, to retain the ideal of many-sidedness, to keep one half at least unnarrowed. "Woman stands for the idea of sanity," he writes, "she

should not have one trade but twenty hobbies. Cleverness shall be left for men and wisdom for women" (*What's Wrong with the World*). Chesterton accordingly objects to the education of girls by the same methods as boys, and prefers the old amateur training of the Victorian days when a girl learned a little painting, a little needlework and a little French.

But if specialization has an unbalancing effect on man, it will be far more dangerous to woman, lacking as she does the masculine flippancy. By her natural thriftiness she is inevitably more conscientious and will become more subdued to what she works in than would a man in similar circumstances. She will take her work too seriously. "If women are to be subjected to the dull rule of commerce", Chesterton argues, "we must find some way of emancipating them from the wild rule of conscience" (*What's Wrong with the World*).

This is a well-argued case and there is a good deal of truth in what Chesterton says; yet he does consistently misstate the position. For example, he misinterprets the relative freedom of the home and the factory, when he says that it is better to teach your own children than those of other people. He ignores the fact that the care of a

family is a full-time job, while teaching or the factory are not. He would, of course, answer the argument that the homes of the poor are by no means romantic, by saying that you must pay men better and not abolish the romance, but he resorts to misinterpretation in establishing this romance which should exist in the healthy home. In order to convince woman that she is very fortunate in having the protection of marriage, he paints a rather erroneous picture of masculine values; and his whole antithesis of the public and private house is scarcely fair. He consistently overstates the lazy, beer-drinking, thriftless side of masculine nature and implies that masculine privileges are really not worth having. After preparing the ground in this way, he can argue that woman has always realized the fatuity of the standards of men and, till the present day, has deliberately chosen to remain in the home. He talks of the suffragette movement, therefore, as a surrender to male values, and describes Miss Pankhurst as "prostrate and penitent". Now it is obvious that men have or had formerly some positive and valuable privileges such as Virginia Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own*. Men at least have always had financial independence, and with it the power to choose their surroundings



and the freedom to create works of art, while women, never possessing an income and a room of their own, have written relatively little. And one proof of Mrs Woolf's argument lies in the enormous increase of women writers since women have had relative independence; and the fact that most of the women writers in the past have, like Jane Austen, been unmarried.

Chesterton holds the home more sacred than art, but one feels that he would be tolerant in exceptional cases where a woman has creative artistic powers. It is the drudgery of the factory to which he really objects, and woman sharing only the burdens and none of the privileges of man.

Believing so firmly in the family, Chesterton naturally attacks divorce. His political defence of the home as the last stronghold of liberty is legitimate, though he rather over-estimates the danger of the attack. In *The Superstition of Divorce* he advances another argument. Unhappy marriages are exceptions, and to permit divorce is to weaken the whole force of the marriage bond for the sake of a small minority. It is essential that the marriage vow should be absolutely final or else people will marry with the feeling that they can escape, and so will never do their utmost to make marriage a success. The need to preserve the

marriage must be admitted, but once more, it is doubtful whether that is really threatened. There seems no need to fear that divorce will seriously weaken it, provided that it is not made too easy. Normal lovers naturally want to bind themselves together by every conceivable means, from marriage to carving their names on a tree, and that should be a sufficient safeguard of the institution.

Some of Chesterton's reasons for attacking divorce seem rather sentimental. Marriage, he says, is a vow and there is something magnificent in committing oneself irrevocably to some course. Divorce is an admission of defeat, and a breaking of the vow which will inevitably bring loss of self-respect. It is better to go down fighting than to give in. Even a bad marriage, he writes, "is both a noble and fruitful tragedy; like that of a man who falls fighting for his country or dies testifying to the truth". This is certainly a possible point of view, but it is equally true that to keep a vow which all recognize as stupid is simple obstinacy. Marriage was made for man and human happiness must be set above it. It is significant in this connection that Chesterton over-emphasizes the case against divorce by stating it in its lowest terms, always picturing the case of a

mean villainous husband who deserts his wife and children though they continue to love him. He rarely mentions an example of mutual consent or a desire for divorce on the part of the woman, or again, the case of the husband who is badly treated.

Such is Chesterton's defence of marriage and we can see that it is completely consistent with his thought in all other conditions. If you give man the least loophole of escape from the laws of morality, he will immediately abuse it. The trail of the serpent is over all.

The question of votes for women is a more local one and need not be treated in detail. Chesterton's grounds of denial are not very firm. His main argument against women's suffrage is that politics is really a rather unpleasant business and it is best to keep one half of humanity free from them. Government rests ultimately on force and punishment so that "there is something to be said for keeping one half of humanity out of so harsh and dirty a business". This is quite unfair and ignores the positive liberative side of government. If this were really true it would be the best argument possible for oligarchy; for despotism would free the other half of the community from the unhappy responsibility of government.

It is scarcely consistent with his previous defence of democracy.

We can see now that most of Chesterton's fears were ungrounded and that neither votes nor careers for women have perceptibly weakened the marriage bond. But we must remember that Chesterton was replying to the extreme claims for emancipation made by the vanguard of suffragettism, and even Doctor Johnson lost his sense of balance under such conditions.

## Chapter IV

### *The Novels*

“The whole poetry of life consists in attaching importance to sticks and stones”, Chesterton writes in *The New Jerusalem*. “Anything that gives to the sticks of our own backyard even a reflected or indirect divinity is good for the dignity of life.” He is always complaining that the modern world lacks this symbolism. The mediaevals splashed bright colour everywhere, but it had meaning: their monks dressed in brown, signifying the simplicity of earth, and their churches were coloured with the blood of God. The modern world, in contrast, is full of coloured lights and posters, signifying nothing (*The Uses of Diversity*).

Chesterton himself finds sermons in stones and symbolism in the commonest things. A door is something almost metaphysical to him, “an eternal dogma about the right relations of human beings” (*New London, Newer York*): while all gates are gates of Humility. It is only one step from this, to attach symbolic importance to

ordinary human actions, and Chesterton's allegorical novels are the result. As Gabriel Gale describes it: "I doubt whether any of our action is really anything but an allegory. I doubt whether any truth can be told except in parable" (*The Poet and the Lunatics*).

In the *Autobiography*, Chesterton writes: "I could not be a novelist, because I really like to see ideas or nations wrestling naked, as it were, and not dressed up in a masquerade, as men and women." In spite of this, he did write novels, but they are all propagandist and primarily concerned to point a moral. Their action always takes place between men of whom Chesterton emphatically approves and other men of whom he still more emphatically disapproves. Father Brown, McIan and Patrick Dalroy are all Roman Catholics, while Turnbull is the next best thing, a militant atheist. Gabriel Gale develops the land and is good to the poor; Adam Wayne is the true patriot and Basil Grant the true judge; while Innocent Smith is really alive. On the other side there is a host of materialists, sceptics and tee-totallers who invariably come to grief and of whom Lord Ivywood is representative.

In considering Chesterton's novel of ideas it is convenient to distinguish three main types:

firstly, the realistic novel; in the second place, what we may call the allegorical romances; and finally, the full allegorical novels.

The realistic stories, the bulk of which appear in the Father Brown collections, are concerned with real people who hold various philosophies in which Chesterton is interested. The action consists of the relations of these people, which are described realistically; and the whole is within the bounds of possibility. They have all the excitement of an ordinary thriller and are, in fact, generally detective stories. But the interest is primarily in the motives which produced an action rather than in the consequences of that action; and Father Brown in unravelling the mystery, discovers at the same time the heretical philosophy which produced it. We may quote "The Hammer of God" in illustration (*The Wisdom of Father Brown*). The profligate squire has been killed by a mighty blow of a hammer; and the village blacksmith is suspected because he alone seems strong enough to deal such a blow. But Father Brown traces the crime to the squire's ascetic brother, the village parson, who dropped the hammer on to his head from the top of the church tower. Seeing his brother far below in his green riding coat, the murderer imagined him as

a foul green beetle to be crushed, and was seized with the sin of Pride. This story is a good detective mystery, reasonably solved; and at the same time, an analysis of sinful motives. Father Brown, besides being an ordinary Catholic priest, is a symbol of the wisdom of the Catholic Church, and crime is treated as heresy. There are many more examples of a complete realism which continues at the same time to be religious propaganda, but no further illustration need be given. The popularity of these stories is a proof that they are successful.

What we have called the allegorical romances comprise two novels, *The Flying Inn* and *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*. The action of both these novels takes place in some future period of society when certain philosophical or social tendencies of the present are very much more developed. Consequently what in *Father Brown* was treated as an individual problem now becomes a problem for the whole of society. The action is still realistic and the characters are real people, but they are placed in a society in which particular evils of the present are greatly exaggerated: and the question is "how shall society be saved?"

*The Flying Inn* is a fantastic example of this. The scene is laid in the middle of the twentieth



century at a time when oriental thought, particularly that of Turkey, is very seriously threatening to overwhelm the native English tradition. The issue is fought out over the question of prohibition and the English inn. Lord Ivywood, the powerful statesman, is the Nietzschean hero, denying all human limitations and also, greatly under the influence of Mohammedanism, attempting to amalgamate the British and the Turkish empires, to encourage Turkish culture in England and to establish prohibition and the harem. His henchman, a Turk by name of Misyrá Ammon, conforms completely to Chesterton's type of rationalistic madness as described in *Orthodoxy*. He is obsessed with the one idea that English civilization is derived from Turkish and forces all facts to fit his theory. For example, he proves his case by the number of English inns called "The Saracen's Head", or suggests the superiority of Mohammedanism over Christianity by the fact that we call a young man "crescent" and an old man "cross". On the other side is Patrick Dalroy, Catholic and patriot, and Humphrey Pump, the soul of all English innkeepers, deeply versed in English traditions. Lord Ivywood has the ingenious idea of establishing prohibition by abolishing all inn signs and then

making the sale of intoxicants illegal except under a sign. Humphrey Pump takes down his inn sign and sets out in company with Dalroy and a keg of rum which he proceeds to sell whenever he sticks up his sign. The story deals with the travels of these two and their evasions of Ivywood's authority. Ultimately they lead a rising of the English people, which culminates in a pitched battle with Turkish mercenaries and the triumph of the cross. The whole is obviously based on the great Christian Crusades, and the situation is allegorical; yet the details are realistic and extremely exciting. The cross-country journey of the "Flying Inn" the fights and hair-breadth escapes of the two heroes are the more important part of the novel and make good reading out of rather dull allegory.

*The Napoleon of Notting Hill* is a more solid piece of work concerned with the problem of imperialism and nationalism. The scene again is set late in the twentieth century at a time when the great nations have swallowed up all the small ones and organized a dull and efficient world peace. The glamour has completely departed from government and the king is picked by rote, because he is one man, not a crowd. Things begin to happen when the kingship falls to Auberon Quin, a

complete humorist who cares for nothing except a joke. He conceives the idea of reviving the mediaeval customs of all the boroughs of London, for the pleasure of seeing so many hard-headed business men dressed in robes and followed by halberdiers. The people comply and get on with their business, all except Adam Wayne, the Provost of Notting Hill, who takes the affair seriously. In consequence, when it is proposed to drive a new road through his borough, he appeals to local patriotism and declares war on his fellow provosts in the name of Notting Hill. His unexpected victory revives local patriotism everywhere, and the book closes with a vision of every borough closed within its own wall, with its own customs and coat of arms. "So has the soul of Notting Hill gone forth", cries Adam Wayne, "and made men realize what it is to live in a city." The humorist and the fanatic "laughter and love...two lobes of the same brain" have between them created a new world no longer haunted with the burden of broken empires. This is obviously a dramatic treatment of a main Chestertonian doctrine, that the greatest happiness and freedom comes from the love of small things, that a city is more romantic than an empire. But once more the story itself pre-

dominates and we are lost in the excitement of adventure and the joy of battle.

Under the allegories proper, we have included a miscellaneous collection, parts of *The Club of Queer Trades*, *The Poet and the Lunatics*, *Manalive*, *The Man who was Thursday* and *The Ball and the Cross*. They have in common the fact that the allegory predominates in every case. Their aim is so emphatically to preach some doctrine that the realism of their story is frequently ignored in the process and the characters are simplified into naked ideas.

*Manalive*, for example, is concerned with the problem of reviving the romance of common things and the need for appreciation. It is the history of a young man, Innocent Smith, who finds himself among pessimists. He ingeniously convinces most of them that life is worth living by offering to put them out of their misery with his revolver, and finds that a bullet through their hat is an infallible cure. On being sent down from the University, his main study is to preserve the freshness and wonder of his home and married life. He burgles his own house as if it were a stranger's; he goes round the world to find his house with its pillar-box new and strange at the end; and his wife occasionally takes up a situation

as schoolmistress, typist or housemaid so that each time he may woo and abduct her anew. He is, in fact, a symbol of the human need for romance; he is Manalive insisting that it is wonderful to have two legs, to be alive at all. We are reminded of *The Club of Queer Trades* and the episode of "the Romance and Adventure Company limited". This is an organization which arranges, for a consideration, to have anyone surrounded with strange adventures and to give them the excitement of being the hero in a novel.

*The Poet and the Lunatics* contains allegorical treatment of a variety of Chesterton's beliefs. The title implies his favourite antithesis between imagination that is sane, and reason that leads to madness. Gabriel Gale, the hero, has all the right beliefs and is contrasted with a variety of heretical types, after the fashion of Father Brown, but the characters are more frankly allegories. Gale himself, for example, expresses his humility by his trick of standing on his head; and like St Tiller, who was crucified in that position, he is rewarded with a vision of the world as it really is in all its strangeness, "with the stars like flowers and the clouds like hills, and all men hanging on the mercy of God". He has in the opening chapter a queer companion, James Hurrel the

business man, who induces all who come into contact with him to commit suicide. This is followed by "The Yellow Bird", a treatment of the doctrine of liberty and limitation. Mallow the artist finds his fullest expression in painting small things; beginning with a picture of the whole valley, he ascends to the garden and finally feels himself worthy to paint the creeper under the window. Ivanhov, on the contrary, hates all limitation and has a mania for destroying boundaries. He begins by setting the canary free from its cage, and it is killed by wild birds: he breaks the bowl in which the goldfish are contained, and they, too, die. Finally, after throwing open all the windows and breaking the creeper which Mallows loved, he blows up the house in an attempt to free himself of its restriction. Gale states the moral of the action, "liberty is the power of a thing to be itself. . . we are limited by our brains and bodies, and if we break out, we cease to be ourselves and perhaps to be anything". Similarly, "The Crime of Gabriel Gale" is a treatment of that scepticism which believes things to exist only in mind. It is symbolized by a young man who through a series of uncanny coincidences comes to believe that he is God and can make things happen according to his will.

Gale cures him by pinning him to a tree between the prongs of a pitch-fork, and leaving him in agony for two hours. The reality of pain convinces the young man that he is not omnipotent and cures him of his obsession. Gale once more applies the parable: "It is the only answer to the heresy of the mystic, which is to fancy that mind is all. It is to break your heart. Thank God for hard stones; thank God for hard facts." By them alone do we know that "the stars will stand and the hills will not melt at our word". Other heresies are treated in the book, heresies of pride or of science, but sufficient examples have been given to illustrate the general aim and method.

The two most difficult and complete examples of the allegorical novel are *The Man who was Thursday* and *The Ball and the Cross*. *The Man who was Thursday* was written specifically against the pessimism of the pre-war generation. Chesterton describes it, in the *Autobiography*, as a nightmare of things as they seemed to be to the young half pessimist of the 'nineties: "I was trying vaguely to found a new optimism not on the maximum but the minimum of good."

His aim is to show that things are not as bad as they seem, and that civilization is indeed not played out. It begins by defining the anarchist

and orthodox positions symbolized by two young poets, Gregory and Syme. Gregory is the Nietzschean man, hating law and restraint, preferring the great moment to everything else and delighting only in disorder. Syme in opposition is the poet of law because law and civilization represent man's triumph over chaos. "Every time a train comes in I feel that it has broken past batteries of besiegers and that man has won a battle against chaos." The underground railway is the most poetical thing in the world.

We next discover that Syme is a member of a new secret police force whose aim is to resist anarchy. After a series of adventures Syme succeeds in becoming a member of the inner circle of anarchists, the supreme council of six named after the days of the week, for secrecy, with Sunday a terrible and gigantic leader at their head. Syme is elected to the position of Thursday and hence the title of the novel. The subsequent episodes show how, after beginning in terrible isolation as the one good man among the anarchists, he discovers one by one that the other members of the council are also policemen in disguise. The six unite against Sunday and pursue him in a magnificent cross-country chase by coach, balloon and on the back of an escaped



elephant; only to find at the end that he is no more an anarchist than they are, and the whole affair is a joke. Sunday indeed was actually the founder of the police as well as the anarchists. "It was meant to begin with the picture of the world at its worst", writes Chesterton in the *Autobiography*, "and to work towards the suggestion that the picture was not so black as it was already painted." The final episode is complete allegory. The calling of the conspirators after the days of the week suggests that the life of man is to be the subject, and the conclusion applies the parable to the whole world. When the six policemen finally arrive at Sunday's home they are met by his emissary dressed in the colours of the world, "his coat was the exact colour of the purple shadow and his face the exact colour of the red and brown and golden sky". They change their clothes after the chase and are given new ones, each according to his day. Monday has a costume in black and white, symbolizing the first day when God created light out of darkness: Tuesday represents water and dry land, Wednesday the creation of life, and so on. Sunday himself is an allegory of the whole Universe. Throughout the story he is constantly compared to some manifestation of nature, to a wave or a cloud. To every

one of the policemen he seemed different; to Monday, he was menacing and cruel; to Tuesday, a destroyer of faith; to Thursday, something at once beautiful and bestial; to Friday, essentially joyful. These factors, combined with his vast size, make him an effective symbol of the world in all its complexity, so that when the chase is over Syme can cry: "We have only known the back of the world. We see everything from behind and it looks brutal." Sunday seemed a beast from the back. "But when I saw him in front I knew he was a god." The mystery of Sunday is, in fact, the mystery of the world, which, however evil it looks at first, will ultimately be found good, though its workings may pass our comprehension. But if this is really so, why is there suffering? Gogol, one of the Council, asks: "I wish I knew why I was hurt so much." Syme answers: Man suffers and has to fight for his civilization, so that law and order and common things may be as romantic and noble as revolt, "so that each thing that obeys law may have the glory and isolation of the anarchist, so that each man fighting for order may be as brave and good a man as the dynamiter".

This is the Chestertonian answer to the pessimists. If the world seems evil and we cannot

understand it, we must yet cling to our faith and belief in common things. Difficulties and evils are only trials for us to overcome, so that our common values may be the nobler by our fighting for them. And at the end there shall be the Peace of God. "I am the Sabbath. . . . I am the Peace of God. . . . Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?"

*The Ball and the Cross* is more confused allegory, and suffers through trying to include too many subjects. Like *The Poet and the Lunatics*, its title symbolizes the conflict between complete rationalism and religious mysticism. The ball is the symbol of reason, absolutely consistent but incapable of expanding itself. The cross, on the other hand, is "at enmity with itself. The cross is a conflict of two hostile forces, a collision, a crash, a struggle in stone." But it is a better symbol of human nature, because, like human nature, it is irrational, a contradiction in terms: "Man is a beast whose superiority to other beasts consists in his having fallen." And in contrast to the limited perfection of the circle, the cross can expand its arms to infinity without losing its shape.

The book is primarily an allegory of the conflict between these two symbols, between Professor Lucifer, the scientist, and Michael, the monk. Lucifer, whose name is significant, repre-

sents science, and especially evolution. He has a wonderful flying boat, the instruments of which are all ordinary tools evolved into completely new and unrecognizable shapes. "Now science has spoken," he says, "the bottom has fallen out of the Universe." With the help of a rope he has succeeded in hoisting Michael out of his back garden into the flying boat, where the scene opens. Michael represents the religious point of view: in opposition to Lucifer's evolutionary progressiveness, he is completely engrossed in old ideas and traditions, passing his life in refuting heresies a thousand years old.

Michael is eventually thrown overboard but symbolically saves himself by clinging to the cross at the top of St Paul's Cathedral. After demonstrating adequately by his descent the Christian paradox that he who would save his life must be prepared to lose it, he reaches the ground and is put in an asylum by a hostile world. The story proceeds more realistically with the adventures of Ian McIan, a Catholic, and Turnbull, an atheist, who wish to fight a duel over their religions. But science in the person of Lucifer is attempting to crush out all interest in religion, and they are thwarted at every turn for fear their fanaticism should produce a religious

revival. They are hounded from pillar to post, and perpetually escaping arrest in all parts of England and the Scilly Isles, by motor car or by yacht. They meet on the way many allegorical types, the pagan who worships cruelty, the Tolstoyan who hates force of any kind, yet calls in the police, and Durand, the Frenchman, who believes in the rights of man and is a symbol of civilization. They are eventually caught and shut up in a lunatic asylum, along with everyone else who has been witness of their adventures. Lucifer decides that the best way to stifle the popular interest which they have aroused is to persuade the world that the whole affair never happened, and that the people who witnessed it are suffering from hallucination. He has a law passed, in consequence, which makes everyone prove his sanity and by this means easily transfers all his enemies to the asylum. At the moment of Lucifer's triumph, however, Durand, satisfied that the rights of man have been violated, sets fire to the building. And when all are about to be burned to death, Michael, who is also within, walks unscathed through the flames and liberates everyone.

The allegory seems to be of society enslaved by science and materialism, casting off its chains by

revolution and a belief in the rights of man; and finally saved from the destruction which accompanies revolt, by the intervention and guidance of the Church. This is perhaps the fullest and maturest of the allegories.

It can be seen that Chesterton's novels are remarkably homogeneous. They are concerned with a limited number of themes which occur again and again: the liberty which comes from limitation; the conflict of reason and mysticism; pride and humility; the love of common things. The details of treatment repeat themselves frequently. The study of people in flight from society, for example, occurs in *The Man who was Thursday*, *The Flying Inn* and *The Ball and the Cross*; while Lord Ivywood is a precursor of Professor Lucifer. The idea that science brands as insane all who disagree with its conclusions similarly recurs in *Manalive*, *The Ball and the Cross*, and *The Poet and the Lunatics*. Indeed, every new Chesterton novel is easier to understand from those which have preceded it.

But the most remarkable fact about the novels is their strange blend of realism and allegory which seems unique. By realism is meant a description of human action which has no allegorical significance. Chesterton's novels are written on two

planes and can slip from one to the other without difficulty. It is not usual, for example, to associate the detective story with allegory, yet Chesterton has contrived to fuse the two in *The Poet and the Lunatics*. The effect is achieved, as we have already indicated, by a study of motives rather than actions, so that the detective becomes a philosopher and psychologist combined. Father Brown, Basil Grant and Gabriel Gale are all well studied in the dangers of heresy as well as the course of crime. The characters are allegorical; and yet are commonly allowed to behave like ordinary human beings, to whom no special significance is attached, for large tracts of the novel. For example, Gabriel Gale, in the opening episodes of *The Poet and the Lunatics*, is emphatically an allegory of Catholic humility moving among a proud or practical world. James Hurrell, his companion, is the spirit of big business producing ruin everywhere, rather than an ordinary business man. Yet some of the later episodes are completely realistic, and the book ends by treating everyone as an ordinary person. Gale's connection with Hurrell is explained, and he gets married like any other hero. Similarly, *The Man who was Thursday* begins realistically with a conversation in a suburban garden and the transition to

allegory is clearly marked by the sudden introduction of the fantastic. The table at which Syme is sitting in a café sinks with him through the floor, and he finds himself among underground catacombs, where dwell the anarchists. "What followed was so improbable", writes Chesterton, "that it might well have been a dream", and we recall that the alternative title to the novel was "A Nightmare". The actual adventures of the story are realistic, and include duels and escapes which have no allegorical significance whatever. Yet occasionally the allegory is recalled, as, for instance, when Syme escapes with the help of an old lantern with a cross on it, which had been used in a monastery. The final scene at Sunday's home is, as we have already explained, complete allegory; yet again the novel concludes realistically with the marriage of Syme.

*The Ball and the Cross* is the most consistently allegorical of Chesterton's novels. The two heroes are themselves allegories and their duel is perpetually thwarted by the hand of God. Yet, even here, their erratic flight and elaborate schemes have no ulterior significance. They are wrecked on what seems to be an island, with a large quantity of champagne, for example, and they decide to postpone the duel till they have drunk



it; or they have a fight with drunkards and rescue a lady under the moonlight. We have only to compare these novels with such a book as *The Pilgrim's Progress* to see that they are not true allegory. In *The Pilgrim's Progress* every action is of allegorical significance; if Christian climbs a hill or meets a person, some human difficulty or temptation is symbolized. But the Chestertonian heroes, though representing in general some conflict of ideas, are yet frequently allowed to go off on their own adventures as ordinary people, provided that they make periodical returns to the realm of ideas. Though it may seem absurd at a first glance, Chesterton's method is not dissimilar to that of Spenser's *Faery Queen*. Here, the knights represent virtues and the dragons vices, and the knights are certain to win for the sake of the allegory. Yet it is obvious that Spenser frequently prolongs the fight beyond the purpose of allegory, because he finds it interesting for its own sake. In the same way Chesterton's allegorical heroes are interesting for their own sakes as well as for the ideas they occasionally represent; and it must be acknowledged that the novels are the better propaganda for containing so much realism. A pure allegory of the conflict of Mohammedanism and Christianity would be less

entertaining than the story of *The Flying Inn*; and the history of a duel is better reading than the bare conflict of *The Ball and the Cross*. Chesterton is too good a journalist not to be acutely aware of his readability. The introduction of parable into the popular forms of romance and detective story is only a further illustration of his desire to appeal to all classes of reader.

The combination of romance and allegory is not necessarily a weakness, but the subject of allegory very frequently is, and we must bear this in mind in estimating the value of Chesterton's novels. Their great limitation lies in the fact that they are concerned with the conflict of philosophies, not the feelings of men. *The Pilgrim's Progress* never goes out of date because it describes the ordinary human fears and emotions in relation to the common problems of life and death. But *The Ball and the Cross* and *The Flying Inn* have already become dated because evolution and religion are no longer in such direct conflict, while the menace of Mohammedanism is scarcely thought of. Philosophical conflicts change from generation to generation, but human emotions remain the same, and the only allegory which can hope to live is the subjective one. It is for that reason therefore that we should consider *The*

*Man who was Thursday* as the greatest of Chesterton's novels. It does describe, although in fantastic terms, a man's struggle out of depression into hope; and that is an experience common to all generations. For the rest, Chesterton places truth above art, and if they are forgotten, there is no nobler fate than to be forgotten with the heresy which provoked them.

A few points may be made about the more purely literary value of Chesterton's novels. His detective stories are excellent of their type, and his solutions both simple and unexpected. He scorns the strange Chinaman or the newly discovered death ray, and always plays fair with his readers. For example, in *The Innocence of Father Brown*, a man is murdered, though half a dozen people watching the door see no one enter. Father Brown realizes that someone must have entered who was too familiar for any one to notice and, consequently, traces the crime to the postman. Chesterton's solutions indeed are generally overlooked by their very simplicity. One of his favourite tricks is to blind the reader's eye by suggestions of the supernatural and fantastic, and then to produce a very obvious explanation which had been missed in the *mêlée*. "The shadow of the

Shark" (*The Poet and the Lunatics*) is a good example of this. A murder is committed on the seashore and no footprints are left in the sand. Suspicion is naturally attached to a rather wild member of the company who has knowledge of strange cults and who perpetually talks of some cruel sea god whom he worships. Such a man, it is argued, would naturally commit a murder in such a place to propitiate his god, and an ingenious solution is suggested, by which he slew his victim from the cliff top, with the help of a boomerang. But Gale, keeping a completely open mind and blinded by none of these suggestions, discovers a much more obvious method. The victim was killed by someone who paddled up just below the level of high-tide, so that his footprints were washed away.

The solutions are always completely fair, but the method of detection is not. The clues are given, but are of such a nature that only somebody on the spot could interpret them. For example, in "The Yellow Bird" (*The Poet and the Lunatics*) the main clue is a small yellow bird which is attacked by other birds among the trees. Gabriel Gale, seeing it, realizes that it is a canary freed from its cage, and so deduces Ivanhov's mania for breaking limitations which ultimately drives him

to blow the house up. But a reader unable to see the bird would never realize that it was a canary and so see its significance. Again, in "The story of the Queer Feet" (*The Innocence of Father Brown*) the only clue is the sound of feet in a passage which pass one way in a slow and measured tread, and then scurry hastily back. Father Brown, hearing the footsteps, realizes that it is someone playing the parts of both guest and waiter at a dinner, for the purpose of deceiving both and stealing a famous set of fish knives. But once more, we cannot deduce the answer because we cannot hear the feet. There is no question of setting the reader a mental problem to unravel: the pleasure comes entirely from seeing it done for us.

But even in the stories themselves, the clues are extremely scanty, and Chesterton's detectives all have amazing powers of intuition. The assumptions are that people act logically according to their philosophies, and that certain heretical philosophies inevitably lead to sin. Gabriel Gale has only to hear a scientist make a few stray remarks on animalcule to know that he is capable of murder. There are certain infallible signs of innocence or guilt in Chesterton's characters which one can recognize after a little practice. There is

no significance in whether a man is kind to animals or not, but whether he is humble or has a sense of wonder or a love of small things.

It is amusing also to notice certain character types in Chesterton's novels which are almost as recognizable as Lord Peter Wimsey. The novel hero, philosopher or Catholic, is generally of a dreamy and meditative nature, loving to lie on the grass and contemplate the smallest things of nature. Madmen, on the other hand, are generally obvious from the first on account of their protruding eyes; while all Chesterton's fighting heroines and heroes have red hair—Dalroy, Turnbull, Adam Wayne, the wife of Innocent Smith and the sister of Gregory.

The novels of Chesterton make excellent reading for their wit and excitement alone. But to understand them fully some previous study of his other work is necessary, where the ideas can be seen wrestling naked. Without such preparation, it is confusing to be plunged suddenly into *The Ball and the Cross*, as a study of the reviews will show. We recall an early review of *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, in which the writer, after paying the usual tributes to the brilliance of style and so forth, concludes hypocritically: "It is difficult to

say what this novel means. It is doubtful whether Chesterton himself knows the meaning." It is hoped that this survey will disprove such a statement and suggest that Chesterton was only too aware of the ideas which he was expressing.

## Chapter V

### *The Essays*

The greater part of Chesterton's prolific and varied output consists of essays, of which he produced more than thirty volumes in all. Most of these were written for journals of one sort or another and so vary in subject according to the nature of the organ in which they appeared. Some, for example, contain a greater or smaller amount of religious discussion, while many of the collections include essays on Christmas or Christmas subjects, written for that time of year. We may also observe that the essays of *Generally Speaking* are a little longer than most in order to fill a page of *The Illustrated London News*.

They were written, for the most part, week by week, and so reflect clearly the events of Chesterton's life. About 1910, for instance, Chesterton moved from London to the country, and the essays at once become more concerned with country matters, descriptions of scenery, or celebrations of the country inn and "the ancient sanctity of the wedding between bread and



cheese" (*A Miscellany of Men*). During the war he was concerned mainly with political affairs, and had little time for original writing; so that *A Shilling for My Thoughts*, in 1916, is an anthology drawn from his previous essays. At the end of the war he visited Ireland and a little later Jerusalem, both described in *Irish Impressions* and *The New Jerusalem*, while several visits to America in more recent years found their expression in *What I saw in America* and *Sidelights on New London and Newer York*.

The religious element is rarely completely absent, and many volumes are written explicitly to express the orthodox point of view. *Heretics*, as its title implies, is an example of this, while *Fancies versus Facts*, *Sidelights on New London and Newer York*, and other of the later volumes are an examination of modern fashions in the light of Catholic tradition. So too are *The Thing* and *The Well and The Shallows*.

There is relatively little development in the ideas of the essays. "I am rather surprised to see how little my fundamental convictions have changed" (*G.K.C. as M.C.*), Chesterton writes in 1929, looking back on his past work. From first to last all essay subjects are related to the few fundamental truisms which appear in his other

work, true liberty, humility and so forth. The very root of his essay method derives from one of these, namely the wonder of common things, as we can see from the title of his best book of essays, *Tremendous Trifles*. In the preface Chesterton indicates the method by which the essays are written: "Let us exercise the eye until it learns to see the startling facts that run across the landscape as plain as a painted fence. . . let us learn to write essays on a stray cat or a coloured cloud." The volume itself completely fulfils this claim, with essays on a piece of chalk, a toy theatre, "what I found in my pocket", or fire, which is called "the Red Angel". "I deny most energetically", he says, "that anything is or can be unexciting", and proceeds to show how startling and significant the commonest things really are.

(Chesterton has, as we have elsewhere observed, a remarkable capacity for discovering new aspects of objects which have become dulled by familiarity.) A staircase, for example, is really "an awful and naked ladder running up into the Infinite to a deadly height" (*Alarms and Discursions*): a bird is "a blossom broken loose from its chain of stalk" and perspective is nature keeping one's uncle "in an infinite number of sizes according to where he is to stand" (*Alarms and Discursions*).

sions). He has a peculiar power of seeing things divorced from their habitual associations, and observing them as they really appear, not as we know them to be. A house is not merely an affair of bricks and mortar, but a covering, like a large hat. This for Chesterton is the real nature of things, as we see them before habit has dulled our perception, and as a child sees them all the time.

Whether a child does in fact see things in this fashion is difficult to say; though it is certain that a child depends more on plain appearances and is relatively free from stock responses to them. Chesterton quotes, as an instance, a little girl who, on her first sight of the sea with its creaming waves, very aptly compared it to a field of cabbages. The comparison is purely visual and might have seemed incongruous to a more sophisticated outlook. It is certain, however, that Chesterton does occasionally attribute to childhood powers of vision which it never possessed, and through insisting that innocence alone can see things as they truly are, slips, himself, into sophistication. Common things may look strange to the child because they are new; but no child would conceive night as "a monster made of eyes" to quote only one instance: and Chesterton seems to be

over-reaching himself in an attempt to make things appear strange.

(But whether Chesterton's perception is really childlike, or the vision of an imagination freed from the chains of familiar association, the result is to give a strange glamour to small or common subjects.) Beginning with something apparently commonplace, Chesterton writes an essay round it, showing how many ideas it can suggest. From a piece of white chalk with which he is about to draw on brown paper, he shows that just as white is a colour, not merely an absence of colour, so virtue is a positive experience, and not an absence of vice. From a Toy Theatre he understands "why the world has always been inspired by small nationalities", or from the noise of the wind, he deduces the great human heresy "that the trees move the wind". The subject, however trivial it may be, is moralized and made symbolic of some great doctrine; and hence it is that the subjects are so varied, the ideas they suggest so relatively consistent. A country walk, a search through his pockets, or the experience of sitting on a jury are twisted round to illustrate the fundamental tenets of his philosophy.

Nevertheless, there is great scope for variety in the initial choice of essay subject, and Chesterton's

early essays abound in brilliant observations and delightful intimacies. They have all the gaiety and the preposterous confidence of a very young man. "When the background of man's life is a grey background," Chesterton writes defiantly, "then in the name of man's sacred supremacy, I desire to paint on it in fire and gore" (*Tremendous Trifles*), and in this spirit of airy patronage observes that "one sun is splendid: six suns would be only vulgar". (His first book, *The Defendant*, is, as its title implies, a defence of unpopular things and a very provocative collection of essays.) With superb and unselfish arrogance, he takes into his protection such varied subjects as Penny Dreadfuls, gargoyles, planets, china shepherdesses and patriotism.

The most perfect essays are perhaps written between 1908 and 1912, comprising such volumes as *Tremendous Trifles*, *Alarms and Discursions* and *A Miscellany of Men*. Their humour is unsurpassed, their geniality irresistible and there is such variety that it is difficult to make quotation. Chesterton gives us an amusing vision of himself lying in bed and painting pictures on the ceiling with a long brush: or he tells us how one of his essays was really written, in a fever of haste, with small nephews and nieces hammering on the

door for him to come out and play with them. But there is an undercurrent of serious thought which is all the more effective for being so gaily clad. For example, "The Twelve Men" (*Tremendous Trifles*) tells how Chesterton sat on a jury along with eleven other people whose names began with "C". "We settle down with a rollicking ease into our seats, for we are a bold devil-may-care race, the C's of Battersea", he writes, and continues, "we do well and truly try the case between the King and the prisoner in the affair of the bicycles. And we come to the conclusion, after a brief but reasonable discussion, that the King is not in any way implicated." This is excellent fooling, but it quickly passes into an attack on specialization, ending in a fine defence of humility and the common man. Similarly, a defence of gargoyles turns to a defence of the grotesque in general because it is part of human nature.

Certain definite differences of subject and treatment are observable between the pre- and post-war essays, and are especially apparent in his latest volumes. In particular, the method of deducing a doctrine from some tremendous trifle tends to be replaced by a direct discussion of some topic; and instead of essays on a piece of

chalk, on "the advantage of having one leg" or on "the Dragon's grandmother", we have "about heresy", "about political ideas", "on the workers". This is accompanied by a tendency to replace the defence of general ideas, by the attack of cults and heresies. Chesterton hates the philosophies of the pre-war rationalists and pessimists, but he has merely contempt for the bright young things or the modern cynics who have not even a reason for their beliefs. They are the subject of many essays.

The modern generation appears to Chesterton almost as the fulfilment of his early prophecies; for all the evils which he foretold have come to pass. It has lost its sense of values, and, confusing means with ends, is afflicted with the plague of thinking backwards. It would preserve the Church, for example, and yet destroy the religion, or alter the time of the evening meal to suit the cook. "The modern generation...takes the trivial thing first and tries to put it right, without caring whether it is putting anything important wrong" (*Generally Speaking*). Moreover, it has suffered a mental breakdown, and is almost incapable of clear thought, on account of the interest in psychology which has led to an emphasis on how the mind works rather than

what it produces. "Things are being settled by mere association" (*The Thing*), Chesterton repeatedly insists, and the modern generation is far less rational, far more prejudiced than its Victorian predecessors. Its claim to be realistic, for example, is really "a sort of feeble revolt against all traditional things" (*All I Survey*) and it has its own type of prudery as much as the Victorian age which it so violently denounces. Thus it has a hatred of sentimentality which amounts almost to a mystical taboo. "There is a horror of certain phrases as such, of certain allusions and associations, without any real effort to reduce them to any system of reason. The new type of sensitive is sickened by anything that we would call sentimental, just as the spinster was by anything that she would call cynical" (*Avowals and Denials*). With this, there goes a denial of responsibility and a desire to have a good time at all costs; yet even here, the modern generation attempts to live among perpetual high lights, and stupidly mixes its pleasures. Chesterton is never tired of quoting the modern fashion of having music at meals, which, he says, is an insult to the composer, and spoils conversation.

The whole age, he feels, lacks aim and certainty, and clings credulously to any casual



philosophy it encounters. There is, as a result, a significant growth of cults and fetishes, an increase among the simple lifers or those who banish fairy-tales from the nursery. People clutch at Christian science to cure their uncertainty, or put their trust in big business, which is a similar attempt to escape hard facts by denying their existence. The root belief of both is that "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so"; and as the Christian scientist would mesmerize away the fact of pain, so the business man, dealing in abstractions, would put off the collapse by optimism. "His wealth is such stuff as dreams are made of, and his little life is rounded with a slump" (*Sidelights on New London and Newer York*).

There are occasional touches of relief in the picture, as when Chesterton admits that the moderns are more receptive artistically. But as a whole, he condemns the modern generation completely and accuses them of wanting to be pessimistic. They have nothing but conflicting prejudices which they are unwilling to support by argument, bits of various heresies all jumbled together to produce no reasoned view of life. The greatest need is for a comprehensive and unifying philosophy, and Chesterton believes

that orthodoxy will ultimately solve the problem. Science is already becoming more mystical, he declares in *The Thing*, and he believes that the age will take refuge in the Church from sheer weariness of uncertainty and confusion. The latest Catholic essays are a little more serene and in *As I was Saying* there is a certain revival of the pre-war geniality.

It is hardly to be expected that the later volumes, concerned with such beliefs, will make so good reading as their predecessors; and indeed, though never dull, they are occasionally heavy going. Their tone is more pessimistic and they have lost the gaiety and sparkle of "The Game of Croquet" or "The Twelve Men" or "The Appetite of Earth", or a score of others. There appears to be a decline in the quality incidental to the change of method which we have described, as if Chesterton had overwritten himself. But the thought and argument still remain vigorous, and we must remember that the essay about a topic is by its nature less interesting than the intimate gossip of the more personal method.

It is indeed only during the last few years of Chesterton's life that any real decay of his genius is apparent; and the volumes of the 1920's, such as *Fancies versus Fads*, contain some very brilliant

writing. If the general tone is more sober the argument is yet livened by amusing reference and delightful illustration, shown even by a study of *As I was Saying*, which was published in 1936. An essay on Traffic, for example, contains Chesterton's hope that one day he will see a prolonged traffic block "sink slowly into the road and take on the more rooted character of a large and prosperous village".

Chesterton's best essays were undoubtedly written before the war; but (it is a very great tribute to his skill that he can repeat the same ideas so often without their becoming dull.) At his worst, he provokes thought; while at his best he is unsurpassed by any essayist of the century, and worthy to be placed with Max Beerbohm and the classics of the modern essay.

## Chapter VI

### *The Poems*

Chesterton was writing poetry all his life and the collected volume contains a fairly comprehensive statement of his beliefs. The poems, like the essays, pass from indirect to direct propaganda. The earlier collections include a greater proportion of love poems, historical narratives and so forth, while the later have more assorted satire and parody.

The doctrines expressed by the poems are, as we should expect, those of orthodoxy. *The Wild Knight* in 1900 anticipates *The Defendant* with a similar attack on the contemporary pessimism:

O young ones of a darker day  
In art's wan colours clad,  
Whose very love and hate are grey—  
Whose very sin is sad. . . . (*To Them that Mourn.*)

Like *The Man who was Thursday* this collection insists on the need for a sense of wonder:

There is one sin, to call a green leaf grey. (*Ecclesiastes.*)  
“A dumb devil of pride” has taken hold of man  
and Chesterton begs heaven to “take away our

pride". Life is desirable under any circumstances, and we should receive it with gratitude, not dissatisfaction. The babe unborn would be happy only to see the tall trees and the short grasses or the sun to warm him one day through. Such a minimum is enough to make one an optimist:

They should not hear a word from me  
Of selfishness or scorn  
If only I could find the door,  
If only I were born. (*The Babe Unborn.*)

As in the essays there is a similar insistence on the strangeness of the most common things which Chesterton contrives to present in an unexpected way:

If mountains rose on wings to wander,  
They were no wilder than a cloud.

The sun changes the dust in his chamber to snow: night is "a monster made of eyes". In such an astonishing world the poet cries "I wonder at not wondering". It is all so miraculous that we should be humble and value the world as a precious and quite unmerited gift of God:

a single jewel, so bright and brittle and dear  
That I dread lest God should drop it, to be dashed  
into stars below. (*The Pessimist.*)

Similarly, as in *Orthodoxy*, man has free will which turns the joy of humility into a more positive romance, a battle with evil. The hunting of the dragon is as exciting as the hunting of the snark:

When the sages called him a shadow  
The light went out of the sun . . .  
For the hunting of the dragon  
That is the life of man.

. (*The Hunting of the Dragon.*)

Such direct expressions of doctrine are very frequent and need not be considered in detail. But there are more subtle permeations, by which the doctrines appear in circumstances where we should scarcely expect them. For example, *The Ballad of the White Horse* is ostensibly the story of King Alfred's fight with the Danes; yet it is made to express the struggle between Christianity and Paganism, and applied directly to the scepticism of the twentieth century. In the third book, Alfred goes disguised as a minstrel among the Danes, and his song is made an excuse for the definition of the respective creeds. Guthrum, the Danish king, is a pagan and proud. His gods are the image of himself, cruel and merciless, and he has no hope beyond temporal things. He finds the world

sweet but the universe bitter, and his philosophy is *carpe diem*:

The little brooks are very sweet  
Like a girl's ribbon curled:  
But the great sea is bitter  
That washes all the world.

It is interesting to note that the same image occurs in *Orthodoxy*. Alfred, on the other hand, is the Christian accepting human weakness and human unworthiness, but he has the hope of God's mercy and love:

Some see God like Guthrum  
Crowned with a great beard curled,  
But I see God like a good giant  
That labouring lifts the world.

As a result, the pagans are

clothed in feasts and flames  
When all is ice within,

while the Christians are joyful in adversity, full of

The giant laughter of Christian men.

Alfred is upheld by the irrational Christian virtue of hope which denies arithmetic. Though Mary the Mother of God only promises,

No more comfort shall ye get  
Save that the sky grows darker yet,

he fights on until Guthrum is forced to acknowledge something wiser than himself. The conflict of the two attitudes is enforced by the symbolism of Elf's magic spear and the shield of Mark the Roman against which it is splintered: -

Belief that grew of all beliefs  
One moment back was blown,  
And belief that stood on unbelief  
Stood up iron and alone.

But the most significant part of the poem is Alfred's vision in Book VIII of the eternal struggle between Christianity and unbelief. He sees the creed threatened in future years by new unbelief, and the return of the heathen not with warships and swords, but with pen and ink. All the modern forms of fatalism, scepticism and materialism are prophesied. Man shall no longer be "a free knight", but there shall be

Terror and the cruel tales  
Of curse in bone and kin,

by which heredity and "Ghosts" are presumably indicated. There shall be "detail of the sinning | And denial of the sin" and "a broken heart in the breast of the world". By these marks you shall recognize the heathen once more. Alfred concludes:



When is great talk of trehd and tide,  
And wisdom and destiny,  
Hail that undying heathen  
That is sadder than the sea.

All history is the struggle between Christianity and heresy, the Danes or the evolutionists.

From the analysis it can be seen how closely the thought of the poetry resembles that of the prose. Nothing more need be said on this subject except to mention that satire of specific heresies constitutes a large part of the later poems. Evolution, Prohibition, Birth Control, Puritanism in all its forms, Communism and Commerce, all are there, and can be more profitably discussed from a literary point of view in this context.

Chesterton's love of the mediaeval connects him with the mediaevalists of the nineteenth century; and it is significant that his poetry has a strong strain of the Pre-Raphaelite. His early love poetry, for example, has the wild idolatry of Rossetti though it is less sensuous:

But what shall God not ask of him  
In the last time when all is told,  
Who saw her stand beside the hearth,  
The firelight garbing her in gold.  
(*The Beatific Vision.*)

The chivalric love code has influenced both poets. There is, again, a similar use of colour—"Rich white and blood red", "a gleam of blue, a glare of gold". *The White Horse* is full of sea greens, scarlet, sapphire, and golden hair very reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites. Grey, especially, is common, so common indeed as to be almost meaningless—"a great grey cave", "the grey morn of man's life", "grey carven men", "a tall grey horse" to mention only a few of its applications. Like William Morris, Chesterton is master of the sudden passionate outburst, and his poems have often an abrupt dramatic quality very reminiscent of *The Defence of Guinevere*. For example,

Prophet and poet, be he over sod,  
Prince among angels in the highest place,  
God help me, I will smite him on the face,  
Before the glory of the face of God.

(*The Unpardonable Sin.*)

Like William Morris again, and the Pre-Raphaelites in general, he employs many devices of the mediaeval ballad, especially in his longer poems. *St Barbara*, for example, illustrates the true ballad method of mentioning only the essentials and leaving the reader to supply the gaps in logic. We have

Men saw a shadow on the sands  
And her father coming home,

which is followed abruptly by the father's speech  
without further introduction:

There were two windows in your tower,  
Barbara, Barbara.

Again, *The White Horse* is full of the ballad  
repetition:

For the King went gathering Wessex men  
As grain out of the chaff ..  
The King went gathering Christian men  
As wheat out of the husk....

The very atmosphere of *The White Horse* is that  
of certain ballads of the supernatural, especially  
*Thomas the Rhymer*:

And they saw neither sun nor moon,  
But they heard the roaring of the sea.

Chesterton's ballad has a similar turbulence like  
something in a dream; it is full of darkness, con-  
fusion and lurid lights. After the fall of Rome  
there was only

the plunging  
Of the nations in the night.

The Christians marching to battle

Go down the dark road to God's house,

and at the fall of Rome,

The ends of the earth came marching in  
To torch and cresset gleam,  
And the roads of the world that lead to Rome  
Were filled with faces that moved like foam,  
Like faces in a dream.

This effect is promoted by continual reference to cosmic forces or fundamentals of life, the wind, the sea, blood, rivers. For instance:

Their gods were sadder than the sea;  
The ice of the North is broken;  
The high tide and the turn;

which is Alfred's cry when the battle turns in his favour. An impression of vastness is gained by a paradoxical type of superlative such as "the ends of the earth" or

Before the gods that made the gods,  
and a sudden sense of remoteness is achieved by the juxtaposition of finite and infinite, as in

If each man on the Judgement day  
Meet God in a plain alone,

which reminds us of the Lyke Wake Dirge. We

may mention also the frequent only half-explicit allusions to northern mythology:

But the great sea is bitter  
That washes all the world;

phrases which are pregnant with unexplained meaning, such as

And the trees talk all together  
When all men are away.

Or the description of the sea maidens dwelling among the roots of nations "Being sunken for a sign". And above all there is the symbol of the White Horse running through the whole. By such means as these Chesterton produces an impression of pagan confusion and darkness, expressed so well in Arnold's *Dover Beach*, from which he may have taken a hint:

And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Opposed to this heathen atmosphere is the clear, bright detail in the descriptions of the Christian story. Alfred as a boy was shown by his mother

A book she showed him, very small,  
Where a sapphire Mary sat in a stall  
With a golden Christ at play.

Similarly the small kingdom of Athelny is

like a little book  
Full of a hundred tales,  
Like the gilt page the good monks pen,  
That is all smaller than a wren  
Yet hath nigh towns, meteors and men  
And suns and spouting whales.

It is all very small, warm and human, in contrast to the bleak limitless world of the Danes, reminding us once more of *Heretics*, and the great vision which comes from a love of something small. The conflict of religions is made more vivid by the small and colourful oasis of Christianity in the middle of a grey and bewildering scene.

*The Ballad of the White Horse* is certainly Chesterton's finest poem and may be compared with advantage to William Morris's *Saga of Sigurd the Volsung*. Both have the same swift handling of the story, the same exciting rhythms, the stirring half-defined allusions, the slightly bloodless two-dimensional characters and the sudden flashes of colour. Chesterton is perhaps more limited as a story-teller than Morris, because he needs a battle or a lost cause to produce his best work, while Morris can deal adequately with a more pedestrian subject. On the other hand, Chesterton has a passionate quality lacking in

Morris which comes of vigorous religious convictions and which is rare in modern literature.

The shorter poems are rarely so perfect and are generally marred by a weak line somewhere. *The Sword of Surprise*, for example, begins with the thunderous sonority of a Donne sonnet:

Sunder me from my bones, O Sword of God,  
Till they stand stark and strange as do the trees,

but tails off into

That I whose heart goes up with the soaring woods,  
May marvel as much at these.

We must, however, mention that superb poem *The Donkey* and the perfection of its last verse:

Fools! For I also had my hour,  
One far fierce hour and sweet:  
There was a shout about my ears,  
And palms before my feet.

There is an exquisite choice of adjectives in "far fierce hour", and the whole verse produces a shock of surprise. It is interesting also to note the very careful way in which the poem is composed. The earlier verses are full of Biblical allusions which are not recognized until we see their relevance at the end:

When fishes flew and forests walked  
And figs grew upon thorn,

or

Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,  
for example.

Occasionally Chesterton's handling of his material reminds us strongly of George Herbert. We know that he was very fond of the Anglican and Catholic poets of that period, so that the similarity may be deliberate. The poem *Femina contra mundum* illustrates this clearly:

The sun was black with judgement and the moon  
Blood; but between  
I saw a man stand saying 'To me at least  
The grass is green' . . .  
Then a calm voice fell all the thunder through,  
A tone less rough.  
Thou hast begun to love one of my works,  
Almost enough.

This is both the metre and the dialogue manner of Herbert, and we are reminded of *The Collar*:

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild  
At every word,  
Methought I heard one calling 'child'  
And I replied 'my Lord'.

There is, too, perhaps an echo of Herbert's *The Windows* in Chesterton's song for the glass stainers:



We have woven and spun  
In scarlet and in golden green  
The gay coats of the sun.

There is a similarity of idea, though the expression is original and very beautiful.

Perhaps Chesterton's most distinctive poetic quality is his great power and variety of rhythms. The success of *The White Horse* is due to its speed, which depends on its variety of stanza forms. It can be slow and languorous as in

Friend, I will watch the certain things,  
Swine and slow moons and silver rings,  
And the ripening of the plum,

where the sibilants and the long vowels arrest the speed of the verse. At the other extreme it can rise to a crescendo of excitement and the angry beat of the battle drum:

Follow the star that lives and leaps,  
Follow the sword that sings,  
For we go gathering heathen men,  
A terrible harvest ten by ten,  
As wrath of the last red autumn—then  
When Christ reaps down the Kings.

The frequent dactyls and the extra rhyme "then" provide a sort of impetus which suggests vigorous movement. *Lepanto* is possibly his

greatest metrical triumph. Swift iambic lines such as

Mahound in his paradise above the evening star.  
are contrasted with the more heavily accentuated  
line

Don John of Austria is going to the war,  
which recurs like a burden. The shorter repeated  
lines are used with dramatic effect to convey the  
excitement of battle:

But Don John of Austria has fired upon the Turk,  
Gun upon gun, Hurra !  
Don John of Austria  
Has loosed the cannonade.

But it must be admitted that Chesterton's rhythmic effects are not subtle; there is something almost physiological in the directness of their appeal. He can use rhythms like drums to beat out a refrain, but he cannot use them to isolate and emphasize a single word, to enforce an argument or produce a subtle dramatic effect, as Donne can for example. There is something almost vulgar in such a line as

Strong gongs groaning as the guns boom far,

when we compare it with the more ascetic use of emphasis in a line of Yeats:

That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

Yet his mastery of these relatively crude effects is so complete that he can occasionally produce a stirring verse by rhythm alone:

Men that are men again: who goes home?  
Toscan and trumpeter! Who goes home?  
For there's blood on the field and blood on the foam  
And blood on the body when man goes home.  
And a voice valedictory. . . who is for victory?  
Who is for Liberty? Who goes home.

(*Who goes Home.*)

The refrain "Who goes home" balances and rounds off the faster passages preceding it, to produce something between an incantation and the trumpet's sound. Yet it means nothing at all. This indeed is the danger of too facile powers of expression; and Chesterton, like Swinburne, is frequently carried away on the flood of his words when there is really nothing to write about. The comparison with Swinburne is very obvious. Swinburne's long line in the *Hymn to Proserpine*,

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean, and the world  
has grown grey from thy breath,

is a great favourite with Chesterton, who uses it in a poem which is almost a reply:

You that have snarled through the ages, take your answer and go.

I know your hoary question, the riddle that all men know. (*The Pessimist.*)

At the best this is diffuse, and at the worst no man can say how formless. It contains for Chesterton an almost irresistible temptation to write on and lose himself in rhetoric:

The splash of nets passed into it, the grind of sand and shell,

The boat hooks clash, the boat oars jar, the cries to buy and sell,

The flapping of the landed shoals, the canvas crackling free

. . . . .

The noise of little lives and brave, of needy lives and high,

and so on. You can put in what you like so long as you reach the rhyme in the end, and we feel that any word could be substituted for any other without loss of effect. This trick of rhetoric is perhaps Chesterton's most besetting sin, and he finds it very easy to substitute vague if violent feeling for a concrete definition of an idea:

Never so low at least we stumpled,  
Dead we have been, but not so dead  
As these that live on the life they squandered,  
As these that drink of the blood they shed.  
(*An Election Hero.*)

Such writing is almost automatic, with its tautology and common hyperbole. No word has any distinction because there is no control of feeling, nothing but vehemence. Unfortunately this is only too typical of Chesterton's poetry, and he has no natural means of correcting it. His visual sense is not sufficiently strong to force him into precision of statement by accuracy of detail. There is nothing clear-cut about his imagery; his similes and metaphors are generally established by vague emotional association rather than by visual similarity or any strong intellectual link. He writes in *St Barbara*,

Her face was like a window  
Where a man's first love looked out,

which gives an admirable conception of the woman's beauty by referring it to some common emotion which all have felt, but it tells you nothing about the detail of the face. Such a method was successful in *The White Horse*, where it was deliberately exploited as half allusion to

emphasize the confusion of the pagan world. But normally it encourages the tendency to woolliness which is inherent in the long facile Swinburnian metres. Consequently, Chesterton is very much at the mercy of his subject. When he is writing of battles he can use words as trumpets and drums, but when there is no violent action there is frequently this irritating diffuseness. William Morris certainly has the advantage here, for his power of visual clarity is much greater and there is no padding in his verse.

Chesterton's actual variety of metrical forms is very great, ranging from the simplest quatrains to the most involved rhyming schemes. He often uses the most elaborate internal rhymes, as in the poem *Who goes Home* already quoted. But he is capable of delightful simplicity and neatness, as in *The Holy of Holies*:

God Almighty, and with Him,  
Cherubim and seraphim,  
Filling all eternity  
Adonai Elohim.

His blank verse, on the other hand, is generally flat or else inflated, and there is no strong rhythm to sustain it. *The Wild Knight* is poor dramatic writing.

Any poet who has a large number of private

symbols or attaches a particular significance to ordinary things is in danger of producing bathos. Wordsworth illustrates this when he feels that a child or an idiot boy is so sacred that the very mention of it is enough to produce poetry. Chesterton has many such symbols and the grotesque is one of them, a symbol of the less dignified aspect of human nature. Consequently in emphasizing the joyfulness of the mediaeval gargoyle, he writes:

Our gargoyles gather the roaring rain,  
Whose yawn is more than a frozen yell.  
And their very vomiting not in vain.

Or he begins a poem on Lee, "the last of the heroes", with the rather jaunty lines:

If I ever go back to Baltimore,  
The city of Maryland.

No study of Chesterton's poetry would be complete without some mention of his satirical and humorous work, which constitutes a large and happy part of his whole output. His satire is varied in its scope and its methods. Sometimes it has a bitter rhetorical tone, as in *The Old Song*:

I saw the Kings of London town,  
The Kings that buy and sell,  
Who built it up with penny loaves  
And penny lies as well.

But it is more effective when it is restrained, and Chesterton is a master of irony. In the *Song of the Crèche*, for example, the satire is both bitter and amusing:

But mother is happy, for mother is free, ..  
For mother is dancing up forty-eight floors  
For the love of the Leeds international stores.

More frequently it has a downright, almost juvenile quality, as in the songs for education:

The people they left the land, the land,  
But they went on working hard:  
And the village green that had got mislaid  
Turned up in the squire's back yard:  
But twenty men of us all got work  
On a bit of his motor car....

Occasionally, too, we have touches which are very reminiscent of Tom Hood, as in the story of Isiah Bunter who was eaten by cannibals:

And in a highly painful sense  
He was devoured with zeal.

Almost everywhere there is an attractive neatness of phrase, of which the amusing *Song of the Strange Ascetic* is perhaps the best example. After describing what he would do if he were a heathen, how he would fill his life with love affairs and



dancing girls, Chesterton continues with the modern heathen:

But Higgins is a Heathen  
And to lecture rooms is forced,  
Where his aunts who are not married  
Demand to be divorced.

The modern heathen is no longer burned on a fine funeral fire. Instead

they put him in an oven  
Just as if he were a pie.

It can be seen that Chesterton's humour and his satire are inextricably mixed, though the proportions of each vary considerably. The lightest and gayest of his verses are those of *Wine, Water and Song*, which include the songs from *The Flying Inn*, most of which were never meant to be sung and are indeed far too complex to be put to music. Some of his most ingenious rhymes are among them:

But in the streets of Round about  
Are no such factions found,  
Or theories to expound about  
Or roll upon the ground about  
In the happy town of Round about  
That makes the world go round.

There is a fine tap-room element about them all, whether they are defending beer on vegetarian grounds, telling the traditions of the rolling English drunkard and the rolling English road, or throwing new light on the story of Noah:

And Noah he often said to his wife when he sat  
down to dine,  
"I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get  
into the wine."

They raise the cult of the English inn almost to the dignity of a religion and go far to make us believe that malt can do as much as Milton.

To sum up, then. A general survey of Chesterton's poetry must reveal a large quantity of worthless verse; much propaganda that will date in a few years, or has dated already; much that is in too conscious revolt against the contemporary pessimism or industrialism to have any positive value. Even the best of his verse suffers from this to some extent, in that it is perpetually aggressive. There is much poetry of attack, little of calm in Chesterton, and this itself constitutes a limitation. There is, as we have shown, a fatal fluency which can degenerate into mechanical rhetoric. Yet admitting all this, there is still a body of really good verse. There are relatively few good short poems

expressing a personal experience, because his poetry is generally objective and concerned with doctrine. But *The Ballad of the White Horse* will give him a permanent place among the writers of narrative, and he has a secure position among the comedians of English poetry.

## Chapter VII

### *Style and Argument*

{Chesterton's wit has made him one of the best read and least studied of all modern thinkers. His essays are clusters of brilliant epigrams, and their substance is none the less true for being neatly stated. The whole criticism of large organization is crushed into one sentence: "Because one man is a biped, fifty men are not a centipede." The life of Cowper is summed up in a single antithesis: "He was damned by John Calvin: he was almost saved by John Gilpin."} There is no contradiction between wit and seriousness, as Chesterton is constantly insisting {To be witty one must at least think, whereas solemnity can proceed merely from the use of long words (*The Uses of Diversity*). Yet that very verbal felicity, which has so admirably performed its function of amusing, is the cause of widespread distrust. {It is enough to call Chesterton "paradoxical" to destroy his claim as a serious thinker in the eyes of many people.}}

Now paradoxical he certainly is, often to the point of boredom; the essays, and to an even

greater extent the social and philosophical treatises, are full of this form of statement. But it is essential to notice that they are not included for their own sake. "Mere light sophistry", he says in *Orthodoxy*, "is the thing I happen to despise most of all things. I never in my life said anything merely because I thought it funny." He is here referring to the tradition of paradox at the close of the nineteenth century. Oscar Wilde's novels are full of examples, but they are generally of the type which is merely provocative; clever contradictions of accepted truths for the purpose of creating a stir. "Men marry because they are tired; women, because they are curious; both are disappointed", for example, or "A man can be happy with any woman, as long as he does not love her".

Chesterton, on the contrary, defines paradox as "Truth standing on her head to attract attention" (*Paradoxes of Mr Pond*), and the emphasis is emphatically on "truth". Like so many other small details, his paradox derives from the very roots of his philosophy. Man himself is a paradox, "a beast whose superiority to other beasts consists on his having fallen"; while his happiness results from his power to accept contradictions. For example: "The ordinary man has always believed in fate and yet in free will, and that

children were indeed the kingdom of heaven but nevertheless ought to be obedient to the kingdom of earth." The deepest truths indeed spring from apparent contradiction, and the doctrines of the Church are frequently paradoxical in form. "He who loses his life shall save it" is an expression of that mysticism which lies beyond the reach of reason and consistency. Paradox symbolizes the complexity of the Universe.

The paradoxes of the essays are therefore worth serious consideration in their variety. Many are immediately and strikingly true, such as "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly", for example. As Chesterton says in his book on Shaw, a good paradox is a whole argument compressed into a single phrase. Perhaps a larger number are true only in their own context. "It is always the secure who are humble", for instance, is only true when we realize that Chesterton is describing orthodox Christians to whom the doctrine of original sin has brought happiness. But it must be admitted that much of his paradox, though eminently reasonable, is quite untrue; and we feel that even Chesterton is at times unable to resist the temptation of contradicting a generally accepted statement. To illustrate this we may quote *What's Wrong with the World*. "The

really undemocratic and unfraternal thing is the common practice of not kicking the butler downstairs", he argues, because to kick him downstairs proves that you consider him human enough to be angered by him. Or again, "The good painter loves his skill. It is the bad painter who loves his art" (*Tremendous Trifles*). There is a seductive reasonableness about such statements which frequently induces one to pass the most startling assumptions without criticism.

{ Chesterton himself is very much aware of the value of wit. "When we try to make our sermons and speeches more or less amusing", he writes in *The Well and the Shallows*, "it is for the very simple and even modest reason that we do not see why the audience should listen unless it is more or less amused." He is, indeed, a rhetorician in the original sense of rhetoric as the art of persuasion. The aim of all his writing is persuasion, and he uses every means at his command from epigram to downright exhortation. He vigorously attacks the modern tendency to consider such aids to argument as insincere. "A man makes a speech as a man plays a violin," he writes, "not necessarily without feeling but chiefly because he knows how to do it." We therefore see him becoming more rhetorical when he is really indignant, and he is

the master of the purple patch. There is a magnificent passage at the end of *What's Wrong with the World*, when Chesterton's emotion blazes out on the subject of the poor: "With the red hair of one she-urchin in the gutter, I will set fire to all modern civilization. . . . The winds of the world shall be tempered to that lamb unshorn. All crowns that cannot fit her head shall be broken: all raiment and building that does not harmonize with her glory shall waste away." He uses reiteration to produce a thunderous insistence and points his arguments with a pungent antithesis. But as with everything else, he has a fatal tendency to overdo things, which not infrequently produces inflated bombast or tortuous quibblings. *The Everlasting Man* is especially full of this degenerate rhetoric. Moreover, he has an extremely irritating trick of playing with an idea, chasing it through various forms till it is completely stale. For example, an essay in *Sidelights of New London and Newer York* hunts the idea of "keeping your hair on" through every conceivable course. "It is as if the day of judgment were indeed a demonstration that the hairs of our head are all numbered. . . . Beauty draws us by a single hair. . . . whether the whole problem of human love and hate can be explained by capillary attraction. . . . splitting



hairs." The changes are good but there is no moderation.

The cause is mainly a lack of emotion to sustain the flow of words, for where there is a subject on which he feels strongly Chesterton is usually capable of fine writing. This is especially true of his use of metaphor, which is remarkably vivid when his imagination is fired. He loves a scarlet sunset or dawn, anything colourful; and the heroes of his novels are constantly described against such picturesque backgrounds. A house on fire at night, for example, is tersely yet brilliantly portrayed. "Along the front of this ran a blackening rim or rampart edged with a restless red ribbon that danced and doubled and devoured like a scarlet snake" (*A Miscellany of Men*). The very bold use of alliteration is obvious. Or again there is a fine description of dawn in *The Ball and the Cross*: "The sunrise opened above them like some cosmic explosion, shining and shattering and yet silent, as if the world were blown to pieces without a sound." There is a characteristic violence about both the examples quoted which reflects Chesterton's own aggressive temperament. The Gothic architecture appeals to him because "It is the church militant: it is the only fighting architecture. All its spires are spears at rest. The thirsty-

throated gargoyles shouted like trumpets from all the roofs and pinnacles" (*A Miscellany of Men*). Similarly, he writes of a ploughed field: "I saw suddenly the fierce rush of the furrows. They are like battering battalions; they rush over a hill with flying squadrons and carry it with a cavalry charge" (*Alarms and Discursions*). At the other extreme, however, he is able to suggest the unearthly silence of a moonlit night in winter. "It seemed as if all songs and cries had been swallowed in some unresisting stillness under the roots of the hills . . . it was as if one were looking at the back of the world. It was eavesdropping upon an unconscious creation." The recurrent sibilants, it is interesting to notice, produce an exactly opposite effect from the heavy alliteration of the previous passages.

As in the poems, Chesterton makes very extensive use of alliteration, and is able by this means to emphasize single words and impart a suppleness and speed to his sentences. The reader moves along from word to word as on stepping stones, each leading forward always to the next. To quote an example:

And we know not what shock of revelation or revulsion all but unhorsed that strong rider as on the road to Damascus: something indescribable, over-

whelming a plain man in a passion of subtleties that had no outlet but a rush of flight: and far away down the darkling English lanes, the throb and thunder of the flying hooves. For that unholy cross the heathen saw stood up still ugly and unsanctified; black against the daybreak of the world, the shape of shame; and saving such a strange flash of reversion, the cross no Christian will ever see. (*Cobbett.*)

The alliterative syllables occur in interlocking clusters, forming a basic pattern of a b a b b c b c c d c.

<sup>a</sup> shock . . . <sup>b</sup> revelation . . . <sup>b</sup> revulsion . . . <sup>a c</sup> unhorsed . . .  
<sup>a</sup> strong . . . <sup>b c</sup> rider . . . <sup>b c</sup> road . . . <sup>c</sup> Damascus . . . <sup>a</sup> something  
<sup>c b</sup> indescribable . . . <sup>d</sup> plain . . . <sup>d a</sup> passion . . . <sup>a e</sup> subtleties . . . <sup>e</sup> out-  
<sup>b a</sup> let . . . <sup>f</sup> rush . . . <sup>e f</sup> flight . . . <sup>c</sup> far . . . <sup>g</sup> down <sup>c h</sup> the . . . <sup>c h</sup> darkling . . .  
<sup>h h</sup> English lanes . . . <sup>g g</sup> the throb . . . <sup>g c</sup> thunder . . . <sup>f</sup> flying.

"Shock" is picked up in "horsed" and "strong", while "revelation" leads on to "rider" and "road". The final "d" of "unhorsed" becomes progressively more emphatic through "rider" and "road" to "Damascus", and is revived again in "indescribable" after a transition through "Damascus" into "something". The two "pp"

break the sequence, to "subtleties" when the "tle" suggests "outlet" and "flight". The "f" becomes dominant in "far" and the earlier "d" is echoed again in "down" and "darkling". "Ling" introduces the theme of "l" in "English" and, more emphatically, "lanes", to be replaced by "th" of "throb" and "thunder" already faintly suggested by "the" earlier. And so on for the rest of the passage. One is perpetually carried forward, yet reminded of what is behind; and the sudden transition to an emphatic use of a different alliterative letter is softened by the echo of its previous occurrence. This method brings to mind Coleridge's analysis of the function of metre in poetry, which is to emphasize the particular beat and yet lead naturally on to the next.

Similarly, Chesterton's use of imagery in prose frequently resembles that of poetry. One image suggests another, until an ordered and highly complex structure is built upon the original simile. We may quote in illustration a passage from the life of Cobbett, a description of mediæval architecture:

In the midst of this little cluster or huddle of low houses rises something of which the spire or tower may be seen for miles. Relatively to the roofs beneath it, the tower is as much an exception as the

Eiffel Tower....For the first. Gothic arch was really a thing more original than the first flying-ship...its balance of fighting gravitations and flying buttresses was a fine calculation in mediaeval mathematics. But it is not bare and metallic like the Eiffel Tower or the Zeppelin. Its stones are hurled at heaven in an arc as by the kick of a catapult but that simple curve has not the mere cruelty of an engine of war.

The church tower suggests, in the first place, the Eiffel Tower which, on account of its bare metallic structure, brings to mind the flying-ship. This simile at one remove is related back more strongly to the original tower by the additional verbal link of "flying buttress". The Zeppelin is, in its turn, an engine of war, and this, together with a casual reference to "fighting gravitations", leads us on to another engine of war, the catapult. The wheel has come full circle and we are back among mediaeval terms again.

In this way the pattern of imagery becomes more and more complicated, as new similes are suggested, pursued side by side, and finally are marshalled into their position of relevance to the original subject.

On a lower level, this evolving imagery can be

used as a means of subtle contrast. To quote the life of Cobbett once more, we may use Chesterton's attack on the administration of Peel. Peel's "powerful and privileged gendarmerie for the control or coercion of the people" is symbolized by the top hat which his policemen wore. "That was the definition of Peelite citizenship; bribery in a top hat: tyranny in a top hat: anything so long as it was in a top hat." Looking round, Chesterton recalls other uses of top hats and so introduces the top hats which the upper class wore at cricket, another symbol of upper class privilege. "It is no contradiction to this that the hat has since evolved into a helmet", he continues, and pounces on to the word "evolves" as an excuse to launch an attack on his pet anathema, evolution. "Evolution was the essence of that cautious and creeping philosophy." Finally, the top hat suggests the French "cocked hat" with its truly democratic connotations, and Chesterton is able to contrast the French gendarme with the Peelite gendarmerie mentioned earlier.

It can be seen from these illustrations that (Chesterton's exploitation of imagery) will play a considerable part in his method of arguing. But from a purely literary angle, it makes a most

interesting study, and shows subtler handling than we find in his poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Chesterton's prose descriptions are much superior, we might even say more poetical than his verse. He has a surer hold on his medium and his very powers of observation become stronger, as in that brilliant little description of the wet earth after rain. "It was like moving in a world of mirrors" (*A Miscellany of Men*).

The essays of Chesterton reveal an unusual love of solid and concrete things. "I think any poetic mind that has loved solidity, the thickness of trees, the squareness of stones, the firmness of clay, must have sometimes wished that they were things to eat", he writes in *Alarms and Discursions*, "if only brown peat tasted as good as it looks. if only white firwood were digestible." It is inevitable that such a characteristic should appear in his imagery, and we are reminded of a vivid description of the moon. "I have once seen it so naked and ruinous-looking, so strangely lit up, that it looked like a Gruyère cheese, that awful volcanic cheese that has horrible holes in it" (*Alarms and Discursions*).

In consequence, Chesterton endeavours as much as possible to express his ideas in concrete

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted for the foregoing suggestions to T. R. Henn, M.A., of St Catharine's College, Cambridge.

terms. "There is in all good things a perpetual desire for expression and concrete embodiment," he says in *A Miscellany of Men*, "the trend of good is always towards Incarnation." He loves Christianity because it tries to make men feel truths as facts, "always trying to make men not merely admit the truth but see, smell, handle, hear and devour the truth". The Bible is full of "living water, heavenly bread, mysterious manna and dreadful wine" (*Alarms and Discursions*). Abstract terms may be used to hide the truth, as when we call starvation "the economic problem" or sex "affinity". But there is no escaping hard facts and the test of a philosophy is whether it can take on flesh.

His own theories are stated, therefore, in concrete terms, and most arguments are supported by material illustration. *The Well and the Shallows* contains a discussion of modern finance, for example, in terms of eating and selling one's own apples; while the evolutionary idea that morality varies from age to age is stated in terms of camels and shown to be fallacious.

"It is as if a man said: 'Camels in various places are totally diverse: some have six legs, some have none, some have scales, some have feathers. There is no point which they have in common.' The



ordinary man of sense would reply: 'Then what do you mean by a camel? What makes you call them all camels?'"

† Chesterton's use of concrete illustration by analogy introduces the question of his methods of argument. We are not concerned here with his general methods of stating a case. It is sufficient to mention that, like Aldous Huxley, he generally begins with a study of human needs and then erects a religious or social system to fit them. Our main concern is rather with the illegitimate use to which Chesterton frequently puts his admirable command of word and image, so that proof appears where, in fact, none exists.‡ Analogy is obviously a very dangerous weapon in this respect, for what begins as illustration may, after sufficient development, be accepted as proof. For example, a simile may be introduced and elaborated for some time. It is then suddenly related back to the argument in a completely new fashion and one feels that the argument is inevitably clinched. An illustration will establish this point more clearly. In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton is discussing mysticism and reason. Mysticism is the acceptance of what we cannot understand, and the main source of our happiness, while reason implies an attempt to understand everything. It

produces clarity and consistency, but limits the rich diversity of life and ultimately leads to madness. He then illustrates the contrast by analogies of the sun and moon. "Like the sun at noonday mysticism explains everything else by the blaze of its own victorious invisibility." It is too bright for us to see and yet warms and cherishes the whole of our life. Reason, on the other hand, is as clear and cold as the moon: "But the circle of the moon is as clear and unmistakable...as the circle of Euclid on a blackboard." After thus establishing the simile through the links of warmth and brightness, cold and clarity, he suddenly relates the simile back to the main argument by the entirely unexpected connection of reason, madness and the moon: "For the moon is utterly reasonable; and the moon is the mother of lunatics and has given to them all her name." A satisfactory sense of finality is produced and it is difficult to feel that the argument is not proved. We may quote a rather more flippant example from the same book. Chesterton is establishing a connection between democracy and tradition which, he says, is "the democracy of the dead... an extension of the franchise". "The ancient Greeks voted by stones", he continues, "and these shall vote by tombstones; it is all quite

regular and official for", to clinch the argument unexpectedly, "tombstones, like ballot-papers, are marked with a cross."

A slight extension of this method of suggestion is Chesterton's use of a metaphor as a literal fact on which an argument may be based. For example, he observes that the American mentality is childlike and loves "to watch the wheels go round" (*Generally Speaking*). Then taking the metaphor literally, he argues from it: "watching the wheels go round" implies that they will return back to the same place, or if they move on, they will move in a rut. Therefore, Americans are conservative. This may be the case, but there is no logical connection in the argument. The childlike interest in working things does not in fact imply a conservative outlook, and the conclusion is deduced from the metaphor, not the fact for which it stands. Similarly, Chesterton answers the argument that democracy will not work by saying that it does not work, it plays (*What's Wrong with the World*), where the metaphor is again taken in a literal sense.

It is interesting to analyse Chesterton's exploitation of imagery to suggest a conclusion by almost imperceptible allusions. When dealing with some neutral subject, he uses significant imagery

in order to arouse an emotional anticipation of what is to follow, and to prejudice our thoughts in a particular direction. To quote *Orthodoxy* once more, and the conflict of reason with mysticism. Chesterton has shown how reason leads to madness, but has made no mention of religion as yet. Nevertheless, biblical language is introduced to prepare the way: "Curing a madman is not arguing with a philosopher; it is casting out a devil." From such preparation the subsequent argument for religion becomes more convincing. We can see the same thing happening in *The Ball and the Cross*, when dawn is described in language carrying religious associations. "Both the men, according to their several creeds, felt the full thunder of the psalm of life...and every bird that rose with that sunrise caught a light like a star upon it, like the dove of the Holy Spirit." It is essentially a Christian dawn and the atheist Turnbull seems unnatural and out of place.

By such word-play as this, Chesterton tampers with the facts and illegitimately prejudices the argument. His logic is often equally faulty, only escaping criticism by the bewildering speed of attack. He begins with some statement from which he argues so rapidly, leaving the original statement so quickly behind, that he has étab-

lished a new position before, we have time to question the old. Such quick generalization is extremely intimidating. For example, Chesterton is defending the supernatural by arguing that the evidence in its favour should be considered as impartially as evidence for anything else. "You reject the peasant's story about the ghost either because the man is a peasant or because the story is a ghost story. That is, you either deny the main principle of democracy or you affirm the main principle of materialism, the abstract impossibility of a miracle." This is so much dust thrown in one's eyes. By dragging in the patriotic associations of democracy, he screens the fact that we may reject the ghost story for a host of other reasons which would still exist if the man were not a peasant. For example, there might be insufficient evidence, or it might come from a strongly prejudiced source. But the sweeping nature of the assumptions incline one to ignore the fallacy.

By way of variation, Chesterton attacks by pushing the opposite argument to its logical conclusion and so proving a *reductio ad absurdum*. For example, he attacks those who disbelieve in the miracles of St Francis by saying that we deny the miracles now and shall deny St Francis next,

relegating him to mythology. Or again, in denying evolution, he argues that by humanism we were not allowed to sit on a man: by vegetarianism we cannot sit on an animal: next we shall not be allowed to sit on a chair. Obviously the logical conclusion has no bearing on the facts of the case.

There is, also, much proof by bad or doubtful history to which Chesterton does not quite commit himself. He says in support of the Catholic Church that "he would not be surprised" if the Renaissance should come to be regarded as a barbarian interlude in history; or "he would not be at all astonished" to discover that all great scientific movements were originated by the Church. Similarly, he makes vast political generalizations which could never be proved either way, as, for example, when he declares that Catholic countries are always happier than Protestant ones.

It might seem from such an arraignment that Chesterton's arguments are never to be trusted. Yet, on the whole, he is a clear and acute thinker, extremely quick to discover bad arguments in his opponents. He concludes *A Miscellany of Men* with a very just and very angry attack on popular looseness of thought, giving a list of catch phrases

in general use which mean nothing at all. A statement such as "give one patriotism that is free of all boundaries", for example, is a contradiction in terms; while "Progress" is only a means to an end "going somewhere", not an end in itself. Elsewhere, he very aptly analyses the confusion of ethical and financial values in the phrase "making good"; or points out the stupidity of bringing the Church up-to-date by telling youth about the present and future, "not about what happened two thousand years ago" (*All is Grist*). That is, to retain the Church after destroying the only reason for its existence.

Chesterton's contempt for such common newspaper catchwords is unbounded, and most refreshing. He is an especial adept at discovering the unquestioned assumptions of the modern world, and pointing out their relative illogicality. He is particularly aggressive towards what he calls the modern "scientific mysticism" and the materialistic assumption on which it is based. "The world of to-day", he declares in *The Thing*, "does not know that all the novels and newspapers that it reads or writes are in fact full of certain assumptions that are just as dogmatic as dogmas... they are not felt as being preached, and therefore they are not called propaganda." He gives as an

amusing instance a story in which the hero, on seeing a ghost, makes the sign of the cross. This is at once denounced as Catholic propaganda; but if the hero merely remarks "This is the twentieth century", no one takes any notice. Yet in that statement is contained the dogma of materialism and the assumption that ghosts are impossible. For that reason he calls Shaw with all his rationalism "a heathen mystic", upholding values quite as unprovable as those of Christianity.

Chesterton was one of those writers to whom self-expression is easy and who find a keen and masterly pleasure in the handling of words. Apart from other aspects, his writings are triumphs of literary virtuosity, and he has none of that paralysing timidity which would rather be sterile than run the danger of being sentimental. He glories in the sudden violent assault, the grand climax or the purple patch: and if he does at times exaggerate, it is through that exuberance of energy which produced Elizabethan fustian.



## *Conclusion*

The works of G. K. Chesterton are notable for their passionate thought and almost incandescent quality of statement. Yet they are always rooted firmly in the earth, and there is none of the heady, adolescent enthusiasm such as we find in the early poetry of Shelley. Orthodoxy embodies certain permanent facts of human nature which keep his wildest ecstasies anchored in common sense. It gives him a norm of truth, a sort of measuring rod by which he can assess any human endeavour in past or present. This is what makes Chesterton so interesting a historian and biographer, and enables him to express the (continuity of history.) By this means he can isolate a historical figure from the age in which he lives and evaluate his achievements in the light of standards which are still applicable. History, in consequence, becomes a study of real and comprehensible people whose problems are comparable to our own. In the same way Orthodoxy enables him to examine modern movements in the light of permanent values, and bring to notice the assumptions which familiarity has made us

take for granted. We may at times disagree with his evaluations, but it is certain that he has a clearer perception of modern tendencies than most of us. He is not blinded by our everyday assumptions because he has something with which to compare them, and is consequently more critical of them. . .

It is surprising that he could be so critical and yet so popular. For G. K. Chesterton presents the paradox of an essentially popular writer who yet denounces the age in which he lives; a best-seller whose whole desire is to challenge the most cherished ideals of progress and modernity; whose religion is unpopular and whose politics unfashionable. One is driven to demand the explanation of this apparent contradiction. Why should Chesterton be so widely read, and William Morris, for example, interest no one but the student?

The answer may be expressed by saying that Morris was a private gentleman and Chesterton a journalist. This indeed is the source of Chesterton's strength, that he wrote for the crowd instead of the clique, and above all, that his criticism sprang not from disgust but from love. He has that most essential quality, a real knowledge of his fellow-men, and with it an almost

mystical appreciation of the common things of life. In one of the essays he divides the world into Professors, Prigs and People, and his literary career is occupied in defending the last against the former. His writings are a vindication of the ordinary human relationships which compose the greater part of life, and he might be called the ✓prophet and poet of the man in the street.

It is this humanity which gives a solidity and sanity to all his work, which saves his mediaevalism from preciosity and his dissatisfaction from contempt. What for other writers would be an escape is for Chesterton a call to battle against corruption and heresy. From first to last, through polemic, poem and novel, he never ceases to uphold the humanity of the Cross; and we can think of no fitter title for him, nor would he desire one, than the last of the Crusaders.